



BLUE REMEMBERED HILLS

S. VINAYA KUMAR

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S. Vinaya Kumar
(English)

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This book comes as a surprise to me as it will no doubt come to those of my friends who happen to read it. I never meant to write it or publish it.

It all began when in the early eighties I started serious photography as a hobby. The main target of my lens, in those days, was my baby daughter. Then in course of time, my interest in nature and forests induced me to try and photograph wildlife. In this endeavour, I was greatly influenced by the work and advice of the late Ajay Desai, field biologist and elephant specialist par excellence. However, photography was an expensive hobby for a government servant like me to undertake, restricted as I was to a fixed monthly salary. Travel was expensive too. The solution that presented itself to me was to write and publish articles in papers and magazines in a bid to generate some extra income. The best payment available in those days was for work published in the in-flight magazines like *Swagat*, *Namaskar*, *Jetwings* etc., and I broke into this market owing to the happy circumstance that I could give their editors clean copy as well as good photographs, at a time when, as a rule, their regular contributors could supply either texts or photographs, but not both.

Much later, after I had given up magazine writing altogether, former pupils, old friends, and new friends acquired through social network would urge me time and again to bring out a collection of my published work. It was an interesting idea, but I did not give it serious consideration. To start with, I am not a creative writer. Nor am I a politician, or a sports personality or one who can by any stretch of a benevolent imagination be described as a 'celebrity'. So it would be hard to find a publisher interested in bringing out a book written by a 'nobody' like me. The other option would have been to publish the book with my own funds. But a publication which is image intensive would

require a great deal of money if it is to be brought out well, which is prohibitive to a pensioner with just enough savings to live in moderate comfort. For these reasons, and above all since I had no literary ambition, or indeed ambitions of any sort, I never thought seriously of getting a book into print.

But some years ago, on the way to Palakkad for engaging a class in a college there, I met on the train an old acquaintance from my Palakkad days: Mr. Jagadeesh Babu, a senior journalist on his way back home after some business in Trivandrum. He knew about my writing for magazines in the old days and he asked me if I still did that. When I said I had given it up, he told me I should think of collecting the old articles and turning them into a book. As you can imagine, I pooh-poohed the idea. Then Mr. Babu told me something that made me think again. He said magazine stories are scattered by the winds of time. Nobody reads or remembers them after a few days or perhaps months. But a book is something solid and will endure for a much longer time in some library. A book is part of history. May be a hundred years later, somebody might want to understand the state of wildlife and wildlife sanctuaries of India in the late twentieth century, and one of her sources could be my compilation, and she might read it like we now read about the Nilgiris of two hundred years ago, or Kenneth Anderson in the forests of South India, or Jim Corbett in Kumaon. He urged me forcefully to reconsider the idea of a book. If everyone thought as you did, he said to me, we would have no books at all and no knowledge of the past.

Those words induced me to think anew about a compilation. And that, along with the gentle and affectionate nudges from old and new friends has culminated in this volume of published articles, which began life as pot-boilers, and a few not published anywhere but have been written specifically for this book. Most of the photographs accompanying the text have been scanned and processed by me from the original transparencies or negatives and prints. The texts of published articles have been altered slightly, and shorn of catch phrases and repetitions in order to make them suitable for a book of this kind.

The accent of this volume falls on wildlife and natural history, for that is where my chief interest lay at that time, and still lies at present after the passage of so many years. For me this enduring fascination started in my school days with reading books about wildlife: the hunting stories of Jim

Corbett, located in sub-Himalayan forests, F.W. Champion's pioneering photography of tigers in the Sivalik Hills and Kenneth Anderson who writes about the jungles of Southern India. It may sound strange to be told that an interest in natural history and conservation began with the reading of hunting stories. But in my case and in that of many others of my generation, this is indeed the truth. Those stories made me keenly aware of the life of forests dwellers, both human and non-human, and how their interaction often worked to each other's detriment. Specifically, the absorbing accounts of animals and people in Kenneth Anderson's stories who inhabited places with names familiar to me made me want to know more about them. This naturally led to a deeper and more abiding interest in jungles and natural history. My love of natural history was further spurred on by books like *Keralathile Pakshikal* (Birds of Kerala), by Prof. K. K. Neelakantan (a.k.a. *Induchoodan*) in Malayalam, the first, and for many years the only book on birds published in India in any vernacular language, and by E.P. Gee's profusely illustrated book titled *The Wildlife of India*, with its incredibly beautiful colour plates. This exposure to natural history which I had at an early age and the consequent interest in it that I developed have given me a lifetime of pleasure, particularly since it led me to take up nature photography. For this gift I am most grateful to all concerned.

This collection, however, is certainly not a text book of natural history or a guide for present day travellers. On the contrary it is a personal account of some of the wildlife sanctuaries in India which I visited in the span of thirty or forty years: or more precisely the last two decades of the twentieth century and the first two of the twenty first. Aside from these descriptions pertaining to wildlife sanctuaries, I have also included accounts of a smaller number of journeys to places which I consider might be of interest to prospective readers, and descriptions of some people met and experiences undergone which they might find entertaining to peruse through my eyes.

My original intention was to bring out a single collected volume, but it now appears that to do so would result in an inconveniently bulky book Therefore I am forced to split it into two volumes.

Here it is then, the fruits of many years of labour which I present before you, without apology or expectation of approval, gladly offering you the freedom to treat it as you will, with joyful acceptance or derisive rejection.

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I wish to express my gratitude to old friends, many of them former pupils, and new friends acquired through interaction in social media, whose unremitting support and encouragement have finally resulted in this volume, and a second volume in preparation.

I am thankful to my wife Shanthi who patiently read through the draft and made it free of major errors.

I also acknowledge here my indebtedness to Mr. Ashok Kumar PK, who not only designed this volume to my entire satisfaction but also guided me every step of the way through the toil of getting a book ready for printing, something in which I have had no previous experience.

The contribution of each and every one of you is greatly appreciated.





Gaur Herd

THE WILDLIFE OF BR HILLS

On my first night in the “Jungle Lodges and Resorts” Camp within the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple (BRT) Wildlife Sanctuary, a leopard killed a chital fawn a hundred yards from where we were sitting. The thick growth of scrub and the night hid the encounter from view, but sitting around a small camp-fire, we heard the whole episode: the alarm calls of chital and barking deer signalling a predator on the prowl, the coughing grunts of the leopard as it charged, the death cry of the prey, the agitation of the scrub, the continuing alarm calls which tapered off into a silence thicker than the surrounding darkness, the silence of death. We sat entranced around the flickering fire, mute audience to the deadly drama being played out a short distance away. We listened to the silence for a while. Though it was summer, the night seemed to grow inexplicably chilly. Silently, we retired to our tents for the night.



Aparna warming hands

The sanctuary

The BRT Wildlife Sanctuary is situated in Karnataka, around 90 km south-west of Mysore. It spreads over an area of 540 sq km of hilly terrain at an altitude of approximately 3300 to 5000 feet above sea level. The tropical evergreen deciduous forests and grasslands are inhabited by a variety of wildlife. Besides large mammals like elephant and gaur, sambar, spotted deer and barking deer, sloth bear, wild dog, leopard and the occasional tiger, the area is home to over 270 species of birds and over 150 species of trees and shrubs. Here and there, in small pockets live the Soliga tribals who are native to these forests.

As must have become obvious by now, Biligirirangan is certainly not for the feeble-hearted, or the modern breed of “car-to-carpet” wildlife enthusiast who is unwilling to take risks or forgo luxury. I first heard about the place some 30 years ago from a book of hunting stories by the late Kenneth Anderson. The enchanting music of the name stayed in my memory. “Biligiri” in Kannada means “white mountain” and its Sanskrit name “*Swetadri*” means the same thing. The

The K-Gudi Camp

The BR Hills receive torrential rainfall during the monsoons. In this season, the jungles are impenetrable and the sanctuary is closed to visitors. I first visited the place in summer, when the days

place gets this name because of the granite cliffs in the area which have turned white from weathering. At the edge of one such precipice, with a drop of a thousand feet on one side, perches an old temple dedicated to Rangaswamy, another name for Lord Vishnu. For many centuries, this place has been known as the Biligirirangan hills.



The Temple

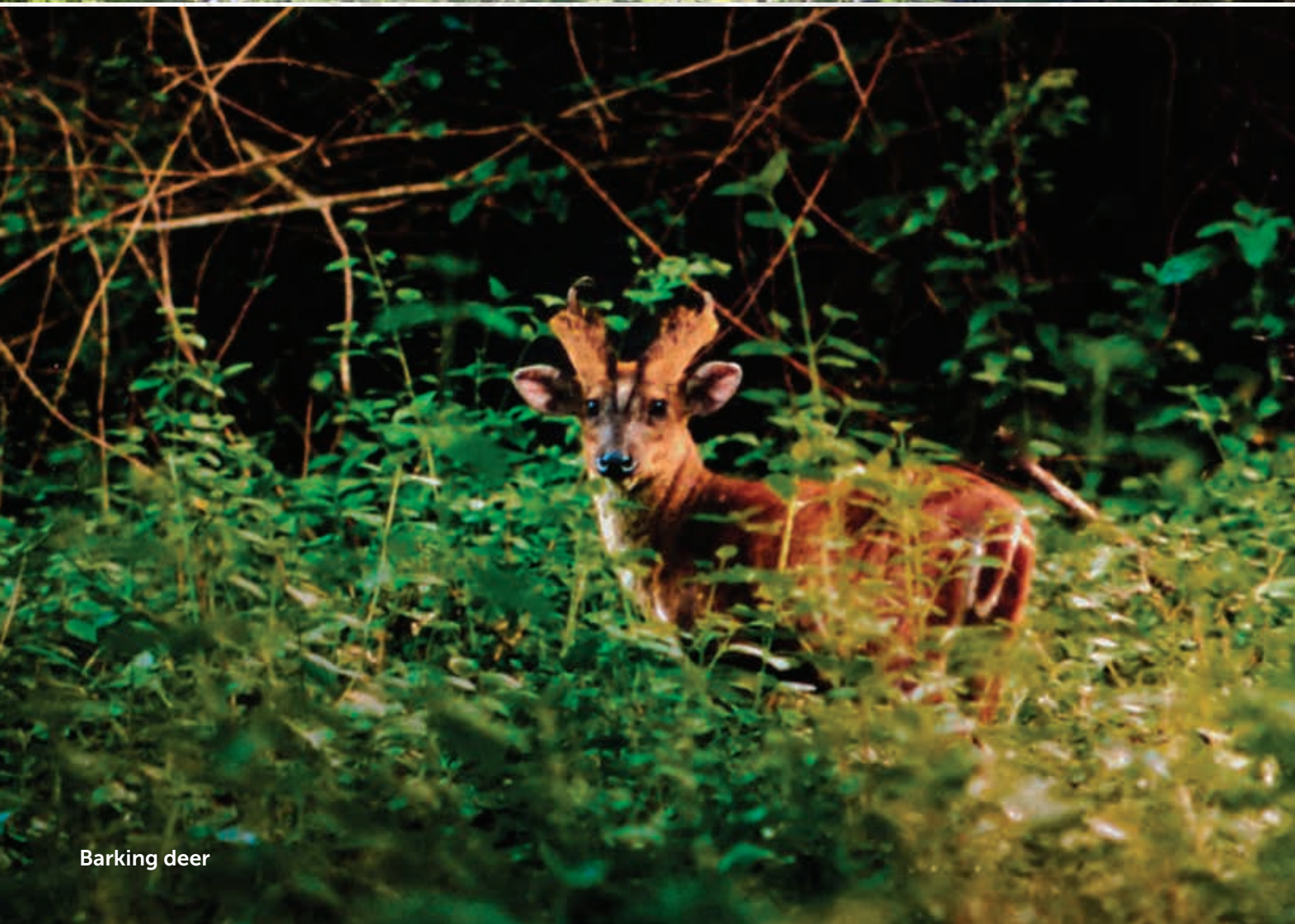
are quite warm and the forests appear dry and colorless. I was told that winter months are much more pleasant. Thus, we drove again into the BRT Camp at Kyathadevara Gudi (K-Gudi for short) one afternoon in



A pair of Gaur



The 'One-and-a-half Tusker



Barking deer

late December. Since we had made advance reservations, camp manager Cecil Kumar, popularly known as Sunny, was expecting us. K-Gudi is a small settlement in the middle of the forest. It has a forest check post, an Inspection Bungalow for visiting forest department officials, the Range Officer's office and quarters, and a few cottages for department staff. Adjacent to the Inspection

Bungalow, within the same walled compound is an old, abandoned hunting lodge once used by Mysore royalty. This dilapidated building is the head quarters of the BRT Camp. The camp manager and his staff stay here. Upstairs is a large hall where the buffet lunch is usually served. Nearby is a tank where wild animals occasionally come to slake their thirst.

A Tusker comes visiting

Our friends Santhosh Sreedhar and his wife Lipi had accompanied us on this trip. Santhosh is an engineer by profession and Lipi is a school teacher. This was their first trip to a wildlife sanctuary. We had our lunch, which was quite delicious,

and after that we retired to our tents to rest. Our jeep ride into the forest was to start at 4 pm. The jeep arrived on the dot, but a wild tusker came to drink at the tank and naturally everyone rushed over to see him in the hope of getting a few good photographs. He was

a big adult, well-known to the locals as the “One-and-a-half tusker” because his right tusk was shorter than the left. For almost half an hour he played hide-and-seek with us, never giving us a straight shot. Finally, the

cacophony raised by the local children drove him deeper into the thicket. It was almost 5 pm. We piled into the jeep, hoping for the best, as in the jungle, the light fades fast. It was to be a memorable drive.

Lady Luck on our side

If the rest of this account reads like a work of fiction, I can only say that it is not my fault. Lady Luck rode with us in person that evening. In 30 years of “wildlifing,” I have never experienced the kind of abundant bird and animal sightings we had during our two days at Biligirirangan. It was a beautiful evening, almost too good to be real. The light was subdued, the wind pleasantly cool. (It is tempting to write that it was also scented by mysterious wild flowers, and indeed that may even have been true!) The jungle looked lush and healthy, and the foliage stood thick with surprise. I knew that the rustling leaves hid, as the poet said, “thousands of pied pebbles that would soon be birds”. And the wildlife! Within ten minutes of the start of the drive, we saw a few sambar, a small herd of spotted deer, two or three barking deer, and then some wild pigs. At about 6 pm, with the light fast fading, we came across a leopard crouching on a rock just a few meters from

the road. He stared at us intently as the last rays of the sun washed over his body, making his rosettes catch fire and burn. After a few minutes he crept off into the brush.

Moving again, 10 minutes later we came upon two sloth bears by the jeep track. They took one look at us and scooted off into deep cover. Just minutes later we encountered more sloth bears, a family of three this time, two adults and a young one. They were digging for roots when the jeep’s diesel clatter alarmed them, and they too bolted. It was amusing to watch their comical, tumbling run, three black balls rolling, totally out of control, down a hill. “Have you people made some sort of an arrangement with the Mysore zoo?” I asked Sunny in a whisper. He gestured towards Santhosh and Lipi. “Beginners’ luck,” he said.

By now it was quite dark and we decided to turn back. The return drive was uneventful till we were almost home. Just a kilometer short of the camp, we saw the road blocked

by a tree. On the other side of the tree stood our old acquaintance, the one-and-a-half tusker, prideful, majestic, ready to defend his handiwork against all comers. We waited for some time, hoping he would move off. But the animal started to trumpet and stamp the ground. The situation was growing tricky. The track was narrow and it was impossible to turn the vehicle around. If the elephant grew

angry enough to charge, we knew that the small tree in its path would be only a minor hindrance. Since it was pitch dark, we could not reverse the jeep very fast either. However, we had an expert driver. With great difficulty he reversed the jeep for some distance till the track became wide enough for the vehicle to turn around. Then we took a circuitous route to the safety of the camp.



Our tent

Camp-fire supper

Supper around the campfire was not without its share of excitement. BRT Camp does not have electricity. Winter evenings can be quite cold, and it was very pleasant to laze around the campfire munching peanuts and swapping stories with Sunny and the other guests. In the cold night sky, the stars stood out sharp and clear. My 11-year-old daughter Aparna was trying to spot Red Giants and Blue Giants, and seemed to believe that she could spot Black Holes too, with a little help from her father! Supper was about to be served when there was a small commotion. Two of the mess boys had run into a leopard at close quarters and were frightened out

of their wits. Armed with torches, we went at once to investigate. The animal was long gone, of course, but about 15 yards from our campfire, we saw, clearly imprinted in the slush made by the boys washing the plates, the pug-mark of an adult leopard! Leopards do not normally hunt human prey. They often frequent the fringes of human settlements in the hope of getting away with a tasty goat or, better still, a domestic dog. This fact comforted us as we went to bed that night. But all the same, the velcro and the zip fasteners of the tents received our meticulous attention. As if that would be of any use against a determined predator!



Campfire dinner. Our host Sunny is talking to Lipi. Aparna is getting some maternal attention after the busy and eventful day



Soligas in front of their 'Podu'

The morning safari

In winter, the morning jeep ride begins at 6.30 am. As We gobbled down our coffee and biscuits, Santhosh came over to me. “I don’t hope to see a tiger,” he said, “that would be asking for too much. But I really wouldn’t mind seeing a leopard again, this time in good light.” I agreed with him absolutely. It was 6.40 am, and we hurried off. Exactly an hour later, we came face to face with a wild tiger.

The mist was still rising in the forest. The winter morning was exquisitely beautiful as sunshine filtered in through the leaves and the mist. We had already seen a fairly large herd of gaur and several barking deer. Suddenly, I saw a tiger on our left. “Tiger! Stop! Stop!” I whispered urgently. There was instant confusion inside the jeep. Aparna whirled around and neatly swept my spectacles off my face, leaving me blind. Trying to tap the driver in order to make him stop the jeep, in my excitement, I hit Santosh instead. He

was changing the lens of his camera. The lens clattered to the floor of the jeep with a sound like an exploding bomb. Of course no one believed me. Sunny actually whispered back that I must have seen a big panther. Reluctantly, the driver reversed the jeep which by now had gone way past the spot. We were silent, filled with anticipation. And there he sat, a magnificent tiger, half in and half out of a thicket. It was like something you dream of, like a painting in a book of fairy tales. Basking in a patch of sunlight, he sat secure in the knowledge of his mastery and his power. The encounter lasted perhaps three minutes. Then, silently, without even seeming to move, he melted into the undergrowth and left us wondering if it all had been a dream. This was my only tiger sighting in South India. Sunny told me that this was his first sighting too. Santosh and Lipi were exultant. And so were the rest of us. Talk of beginners’ luck!

The Soligas

We did not see anything more that day. The next morning, we went to see the sacred tree of the Soligas, the Doddasampige, or the great champak tree. Believed by the Soligas to be over 2,000 years old, it still flowers in season. Nearby flow the clear waters of the Doddasampige stream. Situated deep within the forests, the place has an air of the sacred, an atmosphere of mystery.

The Soligas are a simple people who from time immemorial have been living here

in symbiosis with the forests around them. They collect minor forest produce, hunt small animals and carry out shifting cultivation. Modernity has made inroads into their lives too, and not necessarily for the better. Their innocence is often exploited by ruthless outsiders. They, for their part, cannot understand the restrictions which the authorities place on their freedom of action in the forest which is their home. When they have a difference of opinion with the local Range Officer, Sunny told us, they retaliate by



Safari drive



A road-block made by elephants, one of many)



Tiger sighting in the morning

setting fire to the forest in the hope that the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) would take the Ranger to task! On the eve of the proposed visit of the Chief Conservator, it seems, the hills all around were on fire. The DFO too, had apparently earned their displeasure! Needless to say, such self-destructive acts are the result of deep-seated frustration and despair. The internationally renowned social worker, Dr. H. Sudarshan, and his Vivekananda Girijana Ka1yana Kendra (VGKK) are reputed to be doing good work here. The VGKK strives to make the Soligas self-reliant, stressing health care and education tailored to suit the Soliga

way of life. A tribal co-operative has been established and Dr. Sudarshan also runs a small hospital at the VGKK headquarters, about 15 km from K. Gudi.

About 20 km from K. Gudi is the centuries-old Rangaswamy temple, rarely frequented except by the locals and the occasional visitor from Mysore. The road to the temple can only be described as murderous. But a drive along it, especially in the twilight hours, can be quite rewarding. It is not unusual to encounter elephants and gaur; tiger sightings have been reported too.

quaint was a pair of huge sandals, handmade from leather, which are believed to belong to the deity. According to the local people, Lord Rangaswamy wears these sandals as he makes a regular circuit of his domain. The sandals, kept in the temple, are said to wear out mysteriously over time. Then, alerted by dreams, the villagers make new ones to replace the old.

It is possible to spend a couple of hours here just absorbing the atmosphere. A small tip to the priest and his attendant will ensure that you are left alone to wander around at will. I saw a small, dark man enter the temple and squat before the shrine, and I lingered, wondering what he was about to do. To my surprise and pleasure, he started to sing. Obviously a professional musician, this was his preferred form

of worship. He gave a near-perfect rendering of a composition of Saint Thyagaraja, the great Carnatic music composer of the

nineteenth century. His voice was charged with emotion, and his evident sincerity was quite moving.

Farewell to BRT

Yet another campfire supper, one more night in the tent, another early morning jeep ride into the forest and we would bid good-bye to the hills of Biligirirangan.

The second evening was uneventful: no leopard came visiting, no predator came hunting. Later, safely ensconced in the warmth of my tent, I lay listening to the sounds of the night. A nightjar clucked nearby. From farther off came the startled belling of a sambar. There was absolute silence for a while. I seemed to

hear the song of the Soligas, the song of the great champak tree:

*“Here comes the Lord of Doddasampige
Riding his royal tiger,
My lord with a thousand tresses
O Protect us.”*

Drifting off to sleep, I too hoped that the lord with a thousand tresses would indeed protect the denizens of his beautiful forest. And that the lord of the temple, in his newly sandaled feet, would continue his benign circuit of these hills.

(All photographs were taken with a Pentax-LX film camera, and various Pentax lenses. My medium was mostly Fuji transparency film yielding colour slides. All the animal pictures were taken using a 300 mm, f.4 SMC Pentax lens on this film.. A very few of the people pictures, though not all, were shot on colour negative film.)

Afterword

The above account pertains to a visit we made in the late 1990s, at least 27 or 28 years ago. The BRT property of Jungle Lodges and Resorts, and the BRT wildlife sanctuary must have undergone many changes. The Safari route within the sanctuary has been drastically shortened, I am told, and the visitors are no longer taken to see the Doddasampige, which is in the core area where tourism is banned. The dilapidated

hunting lodge building has been either rebuilt or totally taken down and replaced by other buildings. Supper these days no longer take place in the open air, but in a thatched *Gol Ghar* instead. The Soligas have been tempted away from their old type Podu to newer colonies on the fringes of the forest, probably “line houses” built in uniform design. (I did not get to see them, only heard them described by locals.)

The Temple

The road climbs gradually with the temple at its apex. On one side of the temple is a sheer drop of over 1000 ft, affording a bird’s eye view of the forests of Biligirirangan. The temple is quiet and tranquil. Within its damp, dark, cavernous interiors repose the glittering treasures of the deity, much of them bestowed by generations of Maharajas. One item we found particularly



The sandals of the Lord

Sunny

No account of our experiences in BRT Wildlife Sanctuary can be complete without mention of Sunny, the Manager of the property at that time, and the main person responsible for our most pleasant, profitable (from the 'wildlifing' point of view) and comfortable stay on both our visits there. Sunny, or Cecil John Chiyon Kumar to give his full name ('Chiyon' being the Kannada word for 'Zion') spared no pains, no effort to make the stay of guests exactly what I described in the previous sentence with reference to our own experience there. A trained naturalist and a born host, he impressed everyone with his cheerful demeanor and ever helpful attitude. No effort was too much bother for him as long as it made guests feel happy and at home. He was unique in that respect and this attitude made

me forge a friendship with him outside of his professional life. Sadly, a few years later, he developed Polycystic Kidney Disease, caused by the presence within him of a harmful genetic mutation, which led to eventual kidney failure necessitating frequent dialysis. I met him in this phase of his life too, and was astonished to see the stoicism with which he faced the ordeal. After many years of battle with the disease, Sunny passed away in 2017. He is survived by his wife Dr. Anitha, an Agricultural biotechnologist, and daughter Joanna, a dentist pursuing higher studies in the US.

I dedicate with love this chapter on BR Hills to the memory of this good man whom I feel privileged to call my friend.



We with Sunny and his family at their home in Bengaluru 2005



Portrait of a predator

THE LIONS OF SASAN GIR

It was a few minutes past seven one chilly December morning. The mist still rose from the forest floor as the sun's first rays filtered softly in through the foliage bringing light and warmth. We had been driving slowly around in the forest department Gypsy for slightly over half an hour hoping to see and photograph wildlife. There were tracks and prints in the sand all around testifying to an abundance of animal life, but nothing stirred

this winter morning, not even the tree-tops in the all-too-gentle breeze. Mahendra Shekhva, our driver and guide, switched off the engine, and we decided to wait there for a while. All at once we became one with the silence. The eerie stillness was almost palpable, almost a thing alive, almost frightening, as we sat and waited for the jungle around us to reveal its secret. A few minutes passed. Then, abruptly, a little ahead of us, the lions started to roar.

Roaring lions

There is no other sound in the world quite like the roar of a lion. It is like the voice of the wilderness itself, deep and elemental, emerging out of the bowels of the earth through a lion's body. Early that winter morning just beginning to brighten, the mist still rising, our hearts hammering, we sat and listened, feeling meek and vulnerable. Roar followed roar as the pride,

probably on the prowl and not yet visible to us, expressed.... what? Was it annoyance or hunger or impatience or just plain *joie de vivre*? Whatever it was, the very forests around us seemed to tremble as the kings of the jungle declared their royal presence.

We were in the famed Gir forests of Gujarat, the last bastion and only remaining habitat of *Panthera leo persica*, the Asiatic lion.

Sasan Gir: Some history.

Historically the lion enjoyed a wide distribution in Asia, from Asia Minor and Arabia through Persia

and India. A few hundred years ago, lions roamed freely throughout the wildernesses of northern and central India from Sind to

My three friends pose on the steps of Sinh Sadan, the lodging place run by the Forest Department



Two young Nilgai (Blue Bull) gaze curiously at our jeep

Bengal and down to the Narmada River. Over the centuries, excessive loss of habitat caused by the mounting pressure of human population and ruthless trophy hunting reduced their numbers to just twenty animals in 1913. Thereafter, thanks to stringent protective measures implemented by the authorities, the lion population steadily increased. Today, we have a figure of 305 animals (1995 census) precariously confined to a forest tract of around 1400 km² in peninsular Saurashtra in the State of Gujarat.

Lion sighting in Gir is a matter of luck and

Devalia: Interpretation Zone

Many tourists, however, seem to take it as a personal affront when a lion does not put in an appearance within a day or two of their arrival. Some even cut short their stay and return home disappointed. Needless to say, such people are throwing away their chance to make the best of what can be a truly enchanting experience.

For such tourists who are short on time and patience, but who want to see the lion before they leave the place in a few hours' time, there is an Interpretation Zone at Devalia, around 12 km away from Sasan Gir. This is a fenced area of around 400 ha. (around 1000

acres), which contains most habitat types and wildlife of Gir. Visitors are taken around in a van and animal sighting, including sighting of lions, is assured. At first I was contemptuous of this facility and felt that the visitors were being taken for a ride. But Mr. Mahesh Singh, IFS, the Deputy Conservator who was in charge of the sanctuary at that time, soon set me revising my view. "The Interpretation Zone has been" he said, "a real blessing. It provides an enjoyable and educational experience to casual tourists who leave the sanctuary satisfied. And the tourist pressure on the actual Park area is considerably reduced."

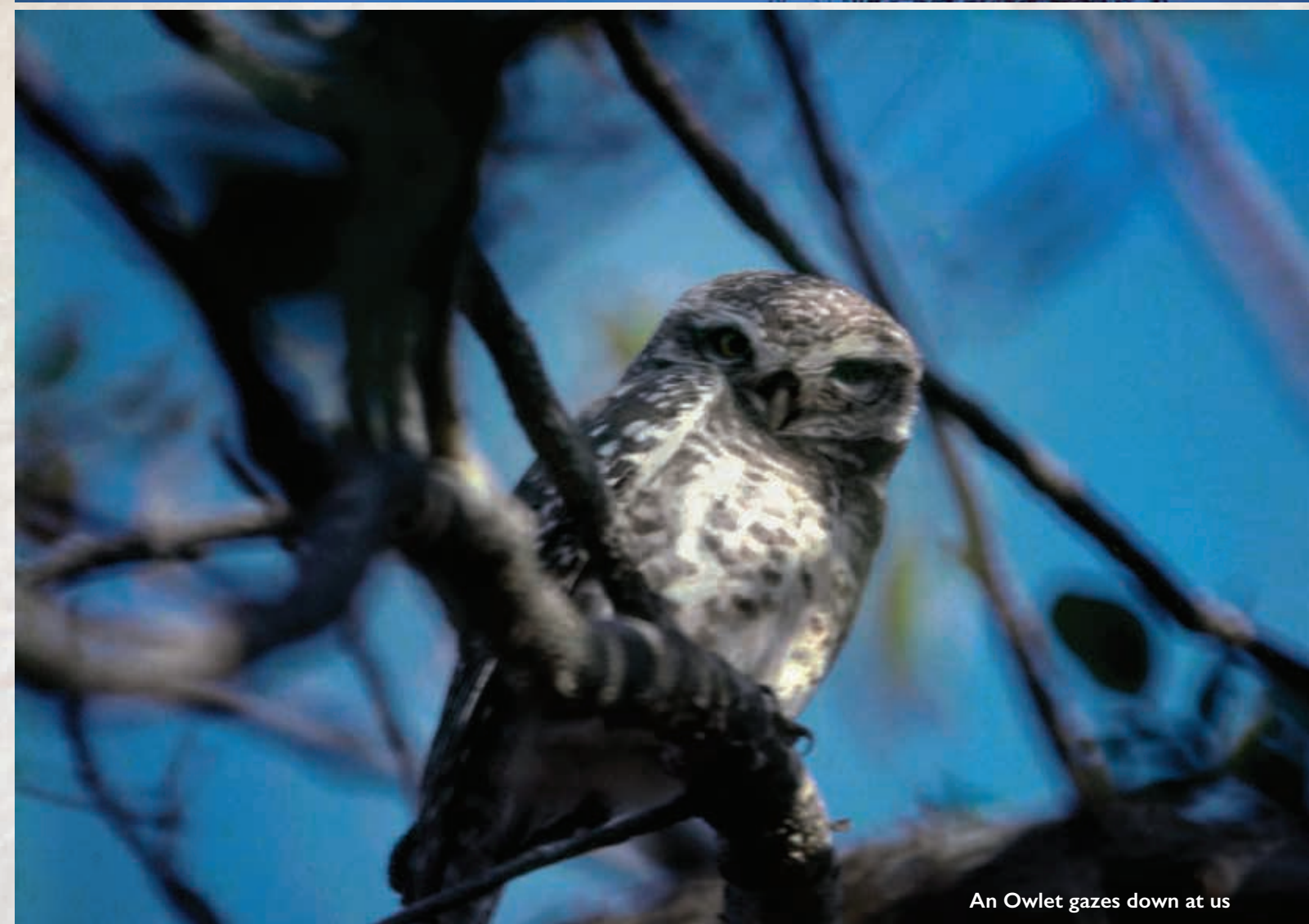
An early start

The day starts really early in the Gir Wildlife sanctuary. One should reach the Reception Centre situated within the Forest Rest House complex by 6 a.m. There

will be two or three Gypsy jeeps waiting there which can be hired to take you into the forest. The usual formalities like filling in forms, paying for tickets etc. have to be completed.



A heron waiting patiently for breakfast, an early morning sight.



An Owlet gazes down at us

And with luck, by about 6:30 a.m. you start on the day's first drive. This is the best time of all; the sun is just rising, the mist just lifting, the wind blowing cold on you, the forest just waking up to lay open before you her many delights.

I found these early morning rides exceptionally pleasant and enjoyable. This is the ideal time for photography: the light gets progressively better, whereas in the evening, it gets worse. At this time, it is usual to see Pea-fowl, Painted Sand-grouse, Hawks and Eagles and a variety of water birds --- Gir has a surprisingly rich bird-life. We also regularly encountered herds of Spotted deer, troupes of Langur monkeys, occasional Blue-bulls, Sambar deer and, once, the elusive Jungle cat. And always, the sharp tang of anticipation was in the air, of coming across 'the King' himself at any moment.

Mahendra Shekhva, our driver and guide, was an excellent companion who knew the forest and its denizens quite well. Further, he was an aspiring wildlife photographer

First lion sighting

The first indication that there were lions nearby came when the morning stillness was shattered by their roaring. The sound appeared to be moving nearer to us. As we waited with hammering hearts, Mahendra started the Gypsy and slowly inched it forward. By now the roars had stopped. Then, suddenly, as we turned round a bend in the track, we saw a young lioness sitting right in the middle of the path

who was aware of the importance of correct lighting and proper positioning for getting good images of wild animals. He too carried a camera and he was well on his way to becoming a competent lens-man. Mahendra was more disturbed than any of us at our failure to spot lions. I kept telling him that it did not matter, but he paid no heed. We were all happy enough with the six hours or so we spent in the forest every day. For there is a great deal more to Gir than just lions. I had come expecting to see a barren land covered in thorny scrub, with buffaloes and villages scattered all over and a few indolent lions too lying around. But these forests were truly wild. The vegetation seemed to be mainly mixed deciduous, but there were also gently undulating hilly tracts, grasslands, scrub.... in short, there was no monotony and our long drives invariably ended before we had had enough. And as it turned out, the long wait was not in vain, for quite unexpectedly, early one morning, we came across a pride of lions on the prowl.

and another one, also on the path, slightly farther away. We stopped the vehicle but the lions got up and casually wandered off into the scrub.

The light was not of the best; still, I managed to get a couple of shots of the animals. As we sat there looking at the lions walking away into the jungle, we suddenly detected motion somewhat farther off. To our surprise, it turned out to be another, older lioness, and



A Sambar stag



A herd of Spotted deer



The eyes of the young lion seemed to pierce my heart

behind her was yet another lion, a young male. The pride was moving purposefully in some direction. “It’s a mother and her grown up cubs, a hunting party,” Mahendra whispered. And sure enough, in the distance, we could make out a herd of Chital and the lions were carefully and silently making their way towards them. In the meantime,

Mahendra had told headquarters of the lion sighting through his walkie-talkie and we saw a couple of jeeps coming in our direction. To decrease the disturbance to the hunting animals, we moved away. Later in the day, we came across the same animals gathered around a buffalo kill.

More lions

Our next sighting was next evening and it was a less exciting event. We were told that lions had been located at a certain place and by about 6 pm we reached that area. One official of the Forest department gathered all of us visitors together and after warning us not to talk, led us a short distance through the scrub. There, in a small clearing were three lions, a mother and two grown cubs, one male and one female. They were lolling indolently on the ground, almost inviting us to take photographs. But once

again, the light was very poor. The animals did not seem to mind the human presence though at times their ears would prick up at some human noise. Once, I saw the male cub’s eyes stare straight at me through my camera lens. The sheer, elemental power of that gaze, which seemed to penetrate right into me and to take my measure, chilled me and I had to fight the primitive impulse to run and hide. After a while, our company made our way back to the vehicles, a chastened and quiet lot who stepped softly and spoke in whispers.

Bhat Bhai: Deputy Ranger

As we were walking back to our Gypsy, I made the acquaintance of Bhat bhai, a Deputy Ranger of the Park and the leader of the lion trackers. Bhat bhai had spent his whole career with the lions of Gir and he felt he knew all about them. His attitude towards them was indulgent and paternal. When he learnt that I was a visitor from the far South, he turned to me and said, “It is said that in your part of the country there are these tigers and that these tigers sometimes

kill human beings. Is this true?” I told him that tigers were still to be found in some states of India including my own and that, yes, they did sometimes kill human beings. I was thinking of Chenna, a tribal tracker of Mudumalai working for the scientists of the Bombay Natural History Society, and a friend of many years, who had been killed by a tiger a couple of years ago. Bhat bhai pursed his lips in disapproval when he heard this. “These lions will never do that,” he said



Grassland



Safari ride

to me with all the pride of a doting father. “No sir, never. These lions are not like the ones you have in Africa. These lions, sir, they are incarnate Truth, creatures of a singularly noble disposition.” He actually used the phrase “*Sachayi ki moorat*” to describe the lions!

Maldharis

Like Bhat bhai, the *Maldharis* of Gir too appeared to take the lions for granted and to treat them as their equals. For generations, the Maldharis have been sharing the lion habitat and their relationship with the lions is almost a symbiotic one. They are primarily graziers whose life-style is pastoral; they rear livestock and sell milk and milk products to nearby villagers. Cattle grazing naturally

Talk of anthropomorphism! But it was obvious that Bhat bhai loved his wards. I remembered reading somewhere that in the past there have been instances of the Gir lions preying on human beings too, but, somehow, this did not seem to be the right time to bring that up.

affects the ecosystem as the forest herbivores have to compete with the buffaloes for fodder. The lions often prey on these cattle because they are generally more sluggish and easier to kill than wild prey. Whenever a domestic animal is killed, the owner receives compensation from the government. The compensation may not be totally adequate, but the *Maldharis* seem to take it all in their



A young male lion at a buffalo kill



First lion sighting in Gir



A lioness on the hunt



Lion watching, on foot. Bhat bhai at the right end, in uniform



Lions feeding on a buffalo kill



A time to run!

stride and do not appear to hold any grudge against the lions. Over the past years, around five hundred *Maldhari* families have been given agricultural land and they have been re-settled outside the sanctuary area. Still there remain around 350 families within the forest living in 54 “*nesses*” or settlements.

In the course of one morning drive, we visited one such “ness”, a collection of a few huts inside a make-shift fencing in a clearing in the forest. Everywhere was cattle-dung and one had to be well-balanced and light-footed to avoid stepping on the squashy mounds. The Maldharies are extremely friendly and hospitable people imbued with an endearing simplicity. The men-folk had already left with their cattle for grazing, and the women of the house welcomed us. First tea, hot and delicious, then conversation, with a little help from Mahendra bhai.

Lakhi

Lakhi was a charming girl in her teens who lived with her parents and several siblings in a small hutment. As the oldest child of the family, she appeared to be the one who did most of the work around the house. Sometimes she would go into the forest on a camel to collect grass for the cattle. We also saw her, along with her siblings, carrying cans filled with water from the well a short distance away. Lakhi willingly posed for photographs, gazing into the lens with such heart-rending innocence that I felt guilty and sad: guilty as if I were corrupting her innocence, and sad for this little girl, her hopes and longings, the inevitable

When I said that I had come from faraway Kerala to see lions, there was shocked silence for a moment and then much giggling and laughter. “To see lions? Really? What is there to see? And why would any one want to see them? Are they not animals like any other animals in the forest? But if you want to see them so badly,” she said, “all you have to do is stay here in the *ness* for a day or two. Just this morning, when this child Lakhi was bringing water from the well, she saw a big male right close to the fence.” Lakhi had stood still and the lion, for his part, had gazed at her and then calmly gone on his way. Lakhi’s mother led us out a short distance, and there on the soft earth, we saw the big pug marks of a lion. The distance between the girl and the lion was something like twenty five feet.



Friends in a tent: (L to R: Nassar, Manikantan and Suresh)



A Maldhari herder with his cattle



Maldhari children



Maldhari milk-man

disappointments, the fruitless weeping and the regret and all the days of her life. “It must be the tea,” I told myself, a confirmed coffee

drinker, as I tried, not quite successfully, to shake off the gloom, and climbed back into our Gypsy.

A Park under threat

Drought, excessive cattle-grazing and tourist pressure are some of the problems facing the Gir National Park. But they are by no means the only ones. An estimated one lakh tourists visit Gir every year. A large number also visit the temples like *Tulsishyam* and *Kankai* and over a dozen others situated within the sanctuary area. These temples operating inside the forest foster a sort of disguised tourism, and sometimes more unsavoury activities. The increased traffic caused by all this activity also causes problems. In the space of ten years, eleven lions were killed by passing trains, and speeding cars and trucks along the hundred kilometre stretch of state highway passing through the sanctuary have taken their toll too.

Half-hearted Tourism

The Gir wildlife sanctuary attracts a number of foreign tourists every year. In a single day there, I talked to two Americans, one Mexican, an English couple, a German and a Jew travelling together, a couple from Australia and a whole bus-full of people from Israel. A number of these tourists seek accommodation in Sinh Sadan, the Rest House run by the Forest Department in Sasan Gir. This is a quiet and comfortable place, conveniently located and fairly well

But the greatest threat to the lions of Gir comes from habitat destruction and the resultant isolation and inbreeding. Though Gir has the highest concentration of lions, there are several smaller ‘meta populations’ in adjoining areas. It is important that these populations keep interacting with one another, for otherwise, inbreeding will hasten their extinction. Today, increasing industrial activity and human pressure in the area pose a serious threat to the migratory routes of these lion populations. “If these forested movement corridors are lost,” said Mr. Mahesh Singh IFS, the Warden of the Park, “the lion populations will be isolated from one another. If that happens, the Asiatic lion will soon become a thing of the past.”

maintained. But the officers in charge of reservations, allocation of rooms etc. who man the Rest House Office have absolutely no English. This causes untold difficulties for foreign tourists as well as for Indians from the non-Hindi belt. In their total incomprehension of the needs and problems of tourists, they often give the impression of being rude and indifferent. More than one foreigner I spoke to appeared to resent this attitude of the staff and what they took to be a gratuitous insult.



Maldhari children with water from their well

Erica Dalzian and Richard Seville, a young couple from Australia, both of them engineers, had a series of problems during their stay in Gir. “This place is lovely,” said Erica, “but it is so poorly organized. The members of the staff offer no help at all and often they are rude and make you feel unwelcome.” The rudeness, of course, would have been unintentional; it was just that there was a total break-down of communication. A wildlife sanctuary exists primarily for the protection of wildlife, not for pampering tourists. Agreed. Still, in a place like Gir which attracts visitors from all over the world, the Forest Department could employ in its Rest House a few people who have been given some training in hospitality management, or at the very least, people who can speak fluent English. The fact that this simple idea has not yet occurred to the authorities shows the casual way in which

tourism is viewed by governments in many of our states.

After a sojourn of six days, it was time for us to bid farewell to the forests of Gir the coming morning. On the whole, we had had a wonderful time, though my hope of seeing an adult male lion remained unfulfilled. Earlier in the day, Mahendra had tried to console me in his own way. “The Prince of Wales, when he came here, did not see any adult male lions either,” he said helpfully and without any satiric overtones. The words cheered me up all right, though not in the way he had intended. The night was chilly, and ensconced in my sleeping bag, I lay awake for a long time thinking of Gir and the last of the Asiatic lions. They have survived for so long, I told myself, they are resilient, perhaps they will not die out, and perhaps we will not let them disappear from the face of the earth.





A view of Sinh Sadan

In the distance, I thought I could hear the lions roaring again, as in a dream, the deep, powerful reverberations echoing through

the forests of the night. And listening to it, I gradually fell sleep.

“Till human voices wake us and we drown”

Afterword

My two visits to Gir National Park, the first in 1997 and the second in 1999, were both equally pleasant, but over the intervening years, its problems do not seem to have been effectively addressed or significantly changed. The Park continues to attract a very large number of tourists, and more recent visitors tell me that this has made the lion safari something of a problem for the tourist in a hurry. And the problems caused by pilgrimage and associated activities no doubt continue unabated. The good news is that the 2020 census of lion population came up with a much larger figure than previously obtained: 674 lions!





TEN THOUSAND STEPS UP MOUNT GIRNAR

“Did you climb the hill with the ten thousand steps?” When Ms. Margaret, the septuagenarian professor of Music from the USA asked me this question, it made no sense to me whatever. I had met her in the Gir National Park of Gujarat where we were both visitors. She accompanied us on two of our evening drives. A common interest in Indian classical music was the starting point of our friendship. I found her an experienced traveller and quite well informed about India and what is

loosely termed Indian culture. After the first evening’s drive, as she was getting out of the jeep, her knees seemed to buckle under her so that she almost fell. And she seemed to hobble as she walked. I put it down to arthritis but she explained that it was the legacy of Junagadh. She had spent a couple of days there and had visited the Jain temple complex on Mount Girnar. She was surprised to learn that we hadn’t even heard of it. “Don’t miss it”, she said persuasively, “It is a wonderful experience. And at the end of it you will



Camel road-block, on the way to Junagadh

understand the reason for my unsteady gait”.

That night, I tried to recall what little I knew of Junagadh. I had passed through the quaint old town twice, and though the place looked architecturally significant, the ruined structures and the dusty, dirty town with its narrow winding roads did not seem very inviting to me. I remembered reading somewhere that Junagadh was the site of one

of the rock edicts of Emperor Asoka. Aside from that, the only thing I could remember about it was that the Nawab of Junagadh had opted to cede to Pakistan at the time of the partition and a popular uprising followed by a plebiscite had resulted in the Nawab’s exile. I talked the matter over with my companions and we decided to take Ms. Margaret’s advice and spend a day or two at Junagadh on the way back.

Junagadh

And thus it transpired that we drove into the little, dusty town of Junagadh one winter afternoon, towards the end of January 1999, on our way back to Jamnagar from Sasan Gir. It was a town, bustling with commerce, and as mentioned earlier, covered in dust, with narrow winding streets strewn with shops, and with elegant remnants of the past: maqbaras, forts, mosques, scattered all around, some intact, many in ruins. Later I was amused to discover that James Burgess, the architectural historian, who visited Junagadh in 1869, had found it “remarkable for dust even among Indian towns”. So, apparently we weren’t the only travellers to find it so, and this dusty atmosphere isn’t a recent phenomenon either. Not one of the people we encountered there spoke English, and even their Hindi was difficult for us to understand. Architectural ruins lay all over the place, mostly overgrown with vegetation, their once-beautiful gardens

unkempt and sickly-looking. The streets were noisy, narrow and crowded. A startling thing about Junagadh is that this town probably has the largest number of working Ford and Dodge cars of 1940s vintage. The cars are all fitted with clattering diesel engines, the sort usually used to power tractors and such like. Belching smoke and fumes, these taxis roar through the narrow alleys carrying twice or thrice their lawfully permissible number of passengers. A profusion of shops and commercial establishments strengthened the impression of a thriving business community. The gateway to the town itself was a remarkable piece of architecture and still in a fairly good state of maintenance. This gateway has been named “Sardar Patel Darwaja” as a gesture of honour to the redoubtable Vallabhai Patel, India’s first Home Minister who negotiated the political integration of the country in the years following Independence.



The Sardar Patel Darwaja



Antique cars used as taxis

A place to spend the night

Finding a place to stay was a bit of a problem. The Circuit House, probably the neatest and the best place, was full on account of an official conference or something of the sort. Most of the other lodges were in the crowded part of the town and we didn't relish the thought of staying in the midst of all that dust and noise, especially so soon after the peace and quiet of Gir. Besides, Junagadh was not exactly a tourist spot. The majority of its visitors were stopover travellers on the way to Gir. A German visitor I met at Gir told me how, while walking along the streets of Junagadh, people often came to stare at him and even touch him

in order to satisfy their curiosity. Very few lodges were geared to the tourist trade, and fewer still had car-parking facility. Finally, it was the manager of the Circuit House who arranged our stay in a small lodge run by a local trust, the *Sodiya Vadi* Temple Guest House. The dilapidated building stood in a spacious compound with plenty of parking space. The rooms, though not very neat, were comfortable enough, and the clouds of mosquitoes could be kept at bay with the continuous use of good-knight mosquito repellent mats. The place was quiet and we were ready to tolerate minor inconveniences.

Sight-seeing

That evening we went round the ancient town of Junagadh. Archaeological finds seem to indicate that this town has a history dating back to pre-Harappan times. The main points of interest in the town are the old fort *Uparkot* built in the ninth century by the *Chudasama* Rajputs around the old city, the Sakkar Baug zoo,

the Junagadh Museum, the *maqbara* or mausoleums of the Nawabs and their relatives, the rock edicts of Emperor Asoka dating back to 250 BC, and of course, the temples on Mount Girnar, the highest mountain of Saurashtra, which looms over the city.

The Fort

We went first to the fort, its walls said to be over 60 feet high in some places, surrounded by scrub, sometimes to such an extent that the fort cannot be seen. A small boy, Kiran, acted as our guide and took us along the circuit giving us a perfectly unintelligible commentary

in what appeared to be a mixture of rapid Gujarati and Hindi. But all the same, we took in the ruins of the intricately fashioned structures, the Rajput palace, the Jama Masjid mosque, the step-wells from which slaves used to fetch water, the ancient Buddhist caves dating back well over a thousand years with



View of Mount Girnar from Junagadh, resembling a reclining human figure



The Jama Masjid, with its spiral stairways,

their exquisite spiral stairways and carved pillars, and a huge Egyptian cannon which goes back to the sixteenth century. Everything about this fort smacks of old age and it is a sobering reflection that these abandoned and

overgrown ruins were once scenes of bustling activity. But it is possible that this fort has had a ruined look for a long time. For according to some, the name Junagadh is itself a corruption of “*jirnakot*” which means ‘fort in ruins’.

The zoo and museum

Next we went to the Sakkar Baugh zoo. This zoo is well laid out and seems to attract a good many visitors. Attached to the zoo is a lion-breeding centre, the only one of its kind in India, where captive lions are bred. According to the official statistics, 180 lions have been successfully bred here, out of which 126 have been supplied to zoos in India and abroad. Aside from ensuring a supply of Asiatic lions to zoos all over the world, this programme also acts as a much-needed safeguard against the sudden extinction of *Panthera leo persica*. Besides, continuous, close observation of the animal will increase our knowledge of the species and help in the formulation of improved management practices.

Within the zoo compound, there is also an interesting museum, which has a good

collection of exhibits from Junagadh’s regal past. Yet another museum to be visited is the Durbar Hall museum which has an even more elaborate and interesting array of exhibits. The trouble with these museums in Junagadh is that the exhibits are all described in Gujarati and therefore their significance is lost on the non-Gujarati visitor. Needless to say, the museum staff have no English, and they generally convey the impression, like similar staff elsewhere in the country, of being bored to death. We also made it a point to take a look at the truly beautiful Maqbara of the Nawabs and their relatives built in the Nineteenth century, with their minarets encircled by enchantingly designed spiral staircases. Afterwards, we went back to our rooms and prepared for an early night.

Onward to Girnar

Next morning, we were ready by 4 0’ clock. For breakfast we had with us a packet of groundnuts and another of dates. We were anxious to start the climb by at least 4:30 a.m. since, at a fast pace, it would take a full three hours to reach the top, and we would reach there just in time to see the sun rise. Further, we wanted to return as early as possible since we planned to drive on to

Jamnagar that same evening before it got too late.

It was less than four kilometres from our lodge to *Girnar Taleti*, the gateway from where the ascent begins. The Girnar range of hills is apparently mentioned in *Skandapurana* and *Vishnupurana* and was known in ancient times as *Revtachal* or *Ujjayanta*. Its five main peaks are named



The Ambaji temple washed in the first rays of dawn



My three friends at the top of Mt. Girnar



Down below, the lights of Junagadh twinkle even as the town lies asleep

Ambaji, Gorakh, Oghad, Dattatreya and Kalika. Of these, *Gorakhnath* is the highest

at 3666 feet. The range of hills is spread over an area of more than 200² kilometres.

The Rock Edict of Asoka

On the way to Girnar, protected within a building by the roadside, is a huge boulder, which carries the ancient inscriptions of Emperor Asoka. Asoka's fourteen edicts, which date back to around 250 BC, are in the *Pali* script. Their general tenor is one of puritanical fervour and the first edict begins, "This is the edict of Raja Priyadarsi, the beloved of the gods (*devānām priyah*) – the putting to death of animals is

to be entirely discontinued..." and goes on in this vein till almost at the end it says, "A man must honour his own faith without blaming that of another, so that little that is wrong will occur..." Later inscriptions in Sanskrit also can be seen, one made during the time of Rudradama in 170 AD and another in the middle of the fifth century in the reign of Skandagupta, the last of the Guptas.

Ten thousand steps: the climb

We had a hot tea from a *dhaba* at the gateway to the steps. The early morning was pleasantly chill and the tea was a nice way to begin the day's activities. There were very few pilgrims ready to make the climb so early in the morning, when it was still at least three hours to daybreak. We started climbing as fast as we could. The steps made of rock are said to have been constructed at the turn of the last century and were in good repair. It was an exhilarating experience to climb them so early in the day, no crowds, no noise, only the sound of breathing, the healthy pumping of the heart, the darkness, the cold wind, time without end.... Now and then, girls and young men with heavy loads of merchandise -- mostly food and drink to be sold to the pilgrims as they get to the top -- would pass us by, or we would pass them as they rested from their work, and truly back-breaking work

too. Sometimes we would come upon these youngsters engaged in a spot of clandestine romancing. Travel can indeed be educative, no doubt about that.

The climb began as a lark, but as we moved higher and higher and the muscles began to feel the strain, gravity began to tell on us and the wind blew cold across the open spaces around. We began to regret having left behind our pull-overs in an effort to reduce the weight: we hadn't expected we would need them anyway because of the muscular exertion we were heading for. But we would have been glad for them now. The pilgrim traffic hadn't started yet, though there were a few early birds like us. The young men and girls could be seen running up unmindful of the steepness of the climb, unmindful of the torturous load on their heads or backs. Our own progress in comparison was slow though it was nonetheless steady. Once we paused



The Jain temple complex at day-break, hawk's eye view



Detail of stone work

and rested for a few minutes, enjoying the view offered by the sleeping town of Junagadh far down below: a dark abyss that seemed to stretch endlessly, with myriad points of glittering light like the star-studded heavens, giving the illusion that you were up there looking down at the sky! We watched the stunning view for a while before continuing on our way. By now our limbs had warmed up, and the climb had begun to feel easier. Every hundred metres or so, there were dhabas catering to the needs of pilgrims, but it would be another hour before they opened. As we climbed higher, the cold became more and more intense. But there was nothing we could do about that. It was all right as long as one kept moving, but when stationary, the sharp wind seemed to bite into your very soul. A cup of some hot fluid would have been most welcome but the possibility of finding anything of the sort was remote. And on top of that, the lights of the temples at the top seemed to recede further and further as we climbed more and more steps in a vain endeavour to reach them.

The temples

Finally, after what seemed an interminable upward clamber, the first cluster of temples lay before us, imposing and truly magnificent and dark, which had endured the worship and the ravages of many centuries. But we passed them by in order to reach the top. We would explore them in detail on our way down. We had a sunrise to catch!

As it turned out, we missed the sunrise by about ten minutes. But it was a fascinating spectacle nevertheless, to see the first light

of the day blaze across the sleeping temples below us. By the time we reached the temple of Ambaji, sacred to the Mother Goddess, the whole of Girnar lay awash in the orange light of dawn. But the wind had become piercingly cold and in spite of the exertion we had just undergone, we began to shiver. Crouched against a huge, rocky wall, which afforded some protection against the icy wind, we refreshed ourselves with the groundnuts and dates we had brought along and cups of scalding hot tea procured from a nearby *dhaba*.

Gorakhnath Tung and Guru Dattatray Tung are two peaks you can visit from the temple of Ambaji. Overlooking the valley on the eastern side is a dangerous rock called Bhairav Jap, which used to be a favourite suicide point of the superstitious who believed that jumping off from this rock would ensure prosperity in the next birth. Here the wind is very strong and even today it can be a tricky place to all except the most sure-footed. Far below, one can see the wind-ruffled plumes *on the backs* of circling vultures and raptors, an unusual, and sobering, spectacle.

Our prime motivation was not piety and soon we began to be irritated by the clamour of the vendors and the priests who, each in their own way, were trying to squeeze whatever they could out of the pilgrims. One shopkeeper-cum-priest even kept up a constant chant over a hand-held loudspeaker exhorting whoever had ears to hear to do something or the other: what it was we couldn't begin to guess. It was high time we started our return journey. Besides, we were all eager to take a closer look at the temple cluster we had passed on our way up.



Mallinatha temple, built by Vasthupala-Tejapala

A closer look

The clusters of Jain temples we had seen were around five hundred feet below the peak at an altitude of around 2800 feet. They appeared to form a sort of fort, made of gray stone and partly at least of marble. Some of them looked new, or at any rate relatively modern, but on the whole, antiquity seemed to be stamped on them. This was almost certainly a place of pilgrimage before the time of Asoka. The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (formerly spelt Hiuen Tsang) who is said to have covered a distance of 65000 kilometres in the sixteen years he spent in India, visited Girnar around 640 AD. He already found established at the top of the hill a temple and a monastery where “holy men and sages walk and fix their abode,” and where “resort crowds of *rishis* endowed with divine faculties”. The largest and the oldest of the present-day temples is the one dedicated to Neminatha, the 22nd *Thirthankara* of the Jains. Inscriptions say that it was repaired in 1278 AD, which means that it must be considerably older. The temple stands in a

quadrangle and carries within it a large, black, stone image of Neminatha.

Next is the triple temple with finely carved domes and a shrine dedicated to Mallinatha, the 19th Thirthankara of the Jains, built by the brothers Vastupala-Tejapala. Inscriptions indicate that this richly ornamented edifice was built in 1177 AD. These dates of building and repairing and re-building tell the story of an insidious form of vandalism that seems to have been practised in our country for hundreds of years. Scholars believe, on the basis of information contained in inscriptions, that ancient structures were pulled down from time to time and the material thus obtained used to construct new temples. To this day we can see, as evidence of this process, beautifully carved rocks in the walls surrounding some of these temples. Close to the Mallinatha temple, there is the temple of Samprati Raja, believed to have been the grandson of Emperor Asoka. However, unfortunately, some modern structures seem to have sprung up in the vicinity of these beautiful monuments, and this, to my mind, appears to be an act of sacrilege.

On the way down to level ground

We spent a lot of time here, in and around the temples, for this was certainly one of the most magnificent places we had ever seen. Here man’s imagination had spread its plumes and danced; here was a grand affirmation of the human spirit. When all our resources have been exhausted, and all our fellow-creatures butchered, and all the land and water and air polluted beyond redemption, when the

world finally expires in one long whimper of violence and stupidity and avarice, I thought, the last examples of our tribe could point to these temples as proof of the nobility and steadfastness of the human race. Reluctantly, we started our descent. By now, the sun was well up, and crowds of pilgrims had begun their climb. Mostly they were Gujaratis from neighbouring districts who were on one of their annual visits. But other states were



The Temple of Gumasta



A pilgrim being brought up in a Doli

represented too, and we even met a couple of villagers from a remote part of Kumaon. We saw women, very old women, climbing the steps with an intrepidity which we had to admire. We saw old men wheezing their way slowly upward, resting, coughing, holding their chests, showing every sign of coronary insufficiency, and still moving upward after brief periods of rest. I was scared that any

moment, one of them might collapse and die in front of us. Thankfully, that didn't happen. And finally, as we reached level ground once again, and even more forcefully on subsequent days, we understood all too well why Ms. Margaret had hobbled when she walked. Climbing up and down ten thousand steps plays havoc on your legs, particularly your knee joints.



Elderly women pilgrims on their way up turn to pose for a photograph



BLUE REMEMBERED HILLS

*Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows;
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?
That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.*

A.E Housman

Earth has not anything to show more fair, wrote William Wordsworth, England's nature poet, and he was moved to write these words not by some particularly beautiful corner of the Lake District, but surprisingly enough, by the still slumbering city of London early one

September morning, viewed from Westminster Bridge. And though removed some two hundred years and thousands of miles from this event, and regardless of the subject which inspired the poem, I could see how well the words described what I saw around me as I trudged along the narrow and slippery track.

Holy ground

We were a small group of people trekking inside the Eravikulam National Park. We had spent the first two hours of our trek negotiating tea gardens, and that was the most difficult part of the climb, for the scenery was uninteresting. After that the going got much more interesting though not any easier; only harder, in fact, to tell the truth. There was a constant drizzle, and clammy fingers of water entered through crevices in my tightly buttoned rain-coat and traced lines of

shivers along my neck and back. The rubber shoes I was wearing squelched in the slush and sometimes slipped on the wet surface. It would not have been so bad if I could have walked slowly and carefully, testing the ground before committing my weight to it. But there were blood-sucking leeches everywhere, and to walk slowly was to invite their unwelcome attention. I had been out from early morning, with another three hours to go before rest and food, and my back-pack, the cameras and lenses stowed safely inside,



Kurinji covers a hillock



A honey-bee gathers nectar from a Kurinji flower



The rolling grasslands and hills

was beginning to express its displeasure on my shoulders. Drenched by rain, covered in mud, buffeted by a cold, wet wind, bleeding from leech-bites, and with the burden of the pack riding on my back – by any reckoning, I should have been miserable and world-weary by now. But in fact, as I stopped for a moment, placed my back-pack on a rock, stretched my shoulders and looked around me, I was supremely happy. For I was on holy ground....

Or so it seemed. I stood still in the grass, and gazed for long minutes at the breath-taking scenery around me. All around us rose the beautiful blue hills, their smooth contours covered by velvet-like grass. This undulating

grassy terrain was interspersed with rivulets of gently flowing fresh water. The impact of this place on the mind seemed to defy any merely prosaic description. For earth had not, indeed, anything to show more fair. Walk anywhere in the climax grasslands of the Western Ghats, and the scenery would be more or less the same: you were a tiny human being surrounded by rolling hills on every side, with waves of grass instead of water, stretching majestically as far as the eye could see. And the abundance of unpolluted springs made thirst and fatigue welcome things for they enabled you to taste the incredible sweetness of that water.

Flowers galore

Everywhere, dotted on the grass, you would see exquisite wild flowers, and in season, usually between July and December, there would be such a profusion of them that you kept moving slowly and reluctantly for fear of

squashing them under foot and you sometimes caught yourself murmuring the ancient chant of the Himalayan pilgrim: पादस्पर्श क्षमस्व मे (*“pādasparśam kṣamaswa me”) —Forgive me the treading of my feet...*

Kurinji blooms

And once every twelve years, an even more extraordinary spectacle greets the visitor. For twelve years Mother Nature labours unseen, behind the veil so to speak, meticulously preparing for the grandest show of all, the mass flowering of the “Kurinji” flower.

The “Kurinji” is a much celebrated flower, sacred to the Tamil Śaivite tradition, extolled in ancient hymns, praised by poets old and new, and revered by tribal peoples living in the hilly tracts where these flowers have been blooming off and on for countless years.

Actually there is not one Kurinji but several species of the flowering herb, all belonging to family *Acanthaceae*. They have flowering cycles of 1 to 16 years. But gregarious flowering is most conspicuous in the case of the “*Neela Kurinji*” (*Phlebophyllum kunthianum*) which blooms once every twelve years. The shrub grows at elevations of around 2000 metres and grows to a height of around 50 or 60 Centimetres. The flowering reaches its peak from mid-September to mid-October, and after seeding, the plants die. When the Kurinji blooms, the hill sides



-The Eravikulam hut in 1994



The same hut as we found it in 2006, after a herd of itinerant elephants had visited it

Tahr, mother and kid



An adult male Tahr is called a "Saddleback" for obvious reasons



turn blue or mauve or purple depending on the angle of the sun's light and weather conditions obtaining at any given moment. It is as if a coloured carpet has been stretched out in all directions. Botanists use the term "plietesials" to describe such plants which bloom at long, fixed intervals, and explain the phenomenon as a strategy of predator satiation evolved over the years. What they mean to say is that if the plants flowered in small numbers every day, their seeds could all be eaten up by birds and small mammals. But if there is mass flowering, the quantity of seed produced is so massive that predation by birds and mammals will not make any dent on the total volume, so that the survival of the species is assured.

The last mass flowering of *Phlebophyllum kunthianum* was in the months from August to November of 2018. Today pockets of Kurinji occur in Munnar and its environs in Kerala, and the area between Munnar and Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu, as well as parts of the *Mukurthi* Wildlife Sanctuary also in Tamil Nadu (near Ooty). The mass flowering is usually a grand tourist event in the highlands and much propaganda is given to it by local

businesses out of commercial interest. This is regrettable because the propaganda attracts a very large number of visitors, many of whom behave in an irresponsible manner. It was a common sight, during the last flowering, to see tourists voraciously plucking the blooms and sometimes even trying to pull out the plants by the roots in an effort to take them back home. They believed, quite wrongly of course, that these plants would flourish in their gardens in the plains. The understaffed Forest Department had a hard time maintaining some sort of order in this chaos.

Loss of habitat owing to deforestation, grazing, encroachment by plantations and forest fire, and unrestricted tourism during flowering season have substantially reduced Kurinji population. Mass flowering strategies adopted by evolution may satiate lesser predators, but the human predator is not that easily foiled! The next flowering in 2030 is expected to cover, unfortunately, a much smaller area than that of 2006 or 2018. And unless stringent protective measures are adopted, our children's children will know Kurinji only from old photographs.

'Climax' grasslands

These grasslands are called 'climax' grasslands because, scientists believe that they represent the culmination of evolution in that particular direction, that they have reached the most perfect state of harmony possible, a sort of biological 'moksha' (loosely translated as 'salvation', a Hindu religious concept, wherein the soul, after having lived an exemplary life, and having fully requited the "karma" of previous

births, gets exempted from re-birth.) to which lesser organisms like us can only aspire and aspire in vain. Interspersed in these vast stretches of grass are little pockets of thick woods, the *sholas*, which literally drip with vitality. The trees of these sholas are home to many arboreal life-forms, like orchids and other epiphytic plants, and the thick undergrowth also shelters many animals, large and small. Names like 'Bear shola' and



Tahr portrait



Tahr sure-footed on slippery slopes



Impatiens species



Satyrium nepalense, a common terrestrial orchid in the grassland



Terrestrial orchid *Habaneria longicorniculata*



Centratherum articulatum



Anaphalis pulneyensis



Osbeckia cupularis



Exacum wightianum



Drosera peltata, a carnivorous plant with a fly trapped on it



A Jewel Beetle feeding on a flower



Osbeckia leschnaultii



Anaphalis margaritacea



‘Tiger shola’ give a clue as to the kind of inhabitants these sholas have been known to support, though these animals are rarely encountered. The interiors of sholas are, in the words of the poet, “lovely, dark and deep”

The Hut

As mentioned earlier, I was part of a group of nature enthusiasts trekking in the Western Ghats of Kerala, more specifically the Munnar area, inside Eravikulam National Park and we were out for wild flowers. Not to pluck them, indeed not to disturb them in any way, but merely to record them and to photograph them in their habitat. We were staying in the beautiful, little fishing hut, situated on a small hillock, with a thick growth of trees behind it which acted as a wind-break. The hut, built by the British in colonial days, in order to afford the Sahibs the opportunity to indulge in fishing, as in their native Scottish highlands, has two or three functional rooms. The largest, the main hall which you enter through the front door, has a fire-place, which is most welcome especially during nights. There is also a small toilet facility at one end of the hut, with water syphoned in from a stream using some clever engineering on the part of the original

indeed, but also (and this is something which the poets have forgotten to mention), infested with innumerable leeches, so that, however tempting it may be, you linger there at your peril.

builders. And looking out from the front door, we could get a marvelous view of the hills and water and grassland. However, the hut, familiar to us from previous visits was a rather shocking sight this time. Apparently, a herd of elephants was in transit, for this area falls within their migratory path, and a small elephant calf fell into the trench surrounding the hut. The mother elephant and others trampled down the steep sides of the trench to enable the calf to get out. This it did, by walking out into the area of the Hut, closely followed by the herd. In no time, the tired, hungry, and angry herd had played havoc with the hut. The iron bedstead within, had been dragged out and we found it twisted out of shape. Part of the roof and the entrance door and window panes also received their attention. The footprints of a baby elephant on the floor within still remained intact, enabling us to reconstruct the story as related above.

Nilgiri Tahr

Our sojourn had been a fruitful quest so far but in these hills the weather is always uncertain. Intermittent rain and mist are facts of life one has to come to terms with in the hills. This morning it had started to rain heavily and till now there had been no let up to the

steady downpour. We were walking towards a valley beyond the next hill for we were told by our *Muthuva* guide that we could probably see a small population of Tahr there. The Nilgiri Tahr (*Hemitragus hylocrius*) is a highly endangered animal seen in small numbers in some parts of the South Indian



Terrestrial orchid *Disperis neilgherrensis*



The epiphytic *Impatiens parasitica*



Photographed by Aparna, aged 9



The trunk and branches of a tree in a Shola



An orchid, *Schoenorchis filiformis* on a fallen tree stem



Dew-drenched in the morning



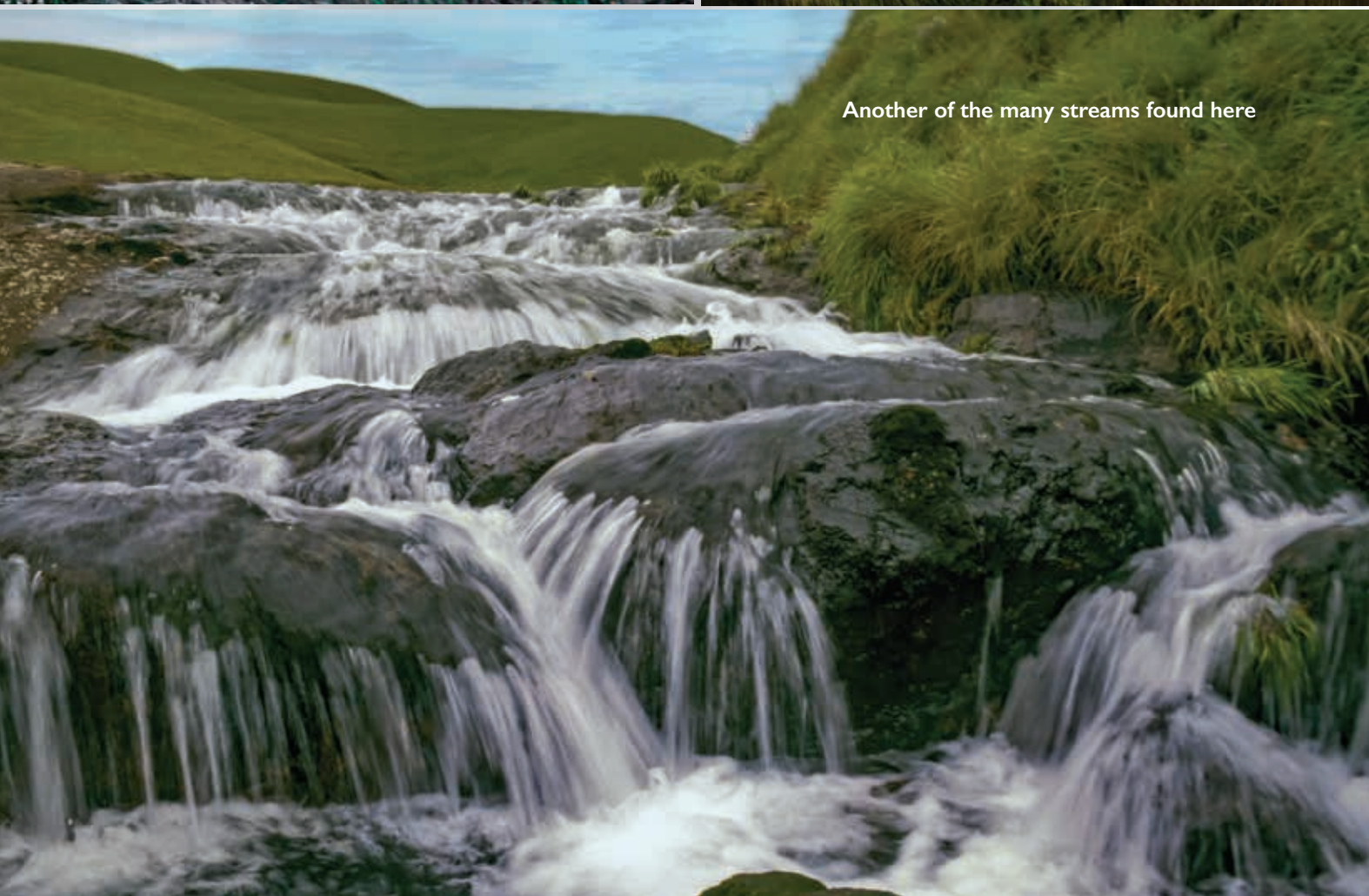
A natural bouquet spied among a rock cluster



Thistle, *Carduus* species



Grassland and Shola, and Kurinji blossoms



Another of the many streams found here



Grassland with clumps of *Pedicularis zeylanica*





Kurinji, 2006.

hills. Photography would be difficult, if not impossible, in this kind of weather, but since we had decided on the scouting trip, we resolved to go through with it any way, despite the rain. And there was always the possibility that the clouds might clear up in a few minutes and the sun would begin to shine again however briefly. The grasslands are incredibly beautiful after a rain: as the sun bursts through and the first rays fall on rain wet grass, all the world seems to be enveloped in an ethereal glow which defies description.

I remember such an occasion some years ago, when the hill sides were all covered with “*Neela Kurinji*”. That day also it was raining. After a few minutes the rain stopped and the sun peeped out. In that spectral, yellow light, the whole earth seemed a place transformed. The Kurinji flowers seemed to take on a special vividness; it was as if a glow of colour

surrounded each flower like an aura. I was left breathless and humble under the impact of that grandeur. I remember too how soon after that, approaching a large tract choked with these flowers, a Sambar deer with a magnificent head of antlers suddenly reared its head from its midst. Unfortunately, both of us were caught by surprise, and the animal bolted before I had time to capture him on film.

Tigers and leopards do inhabit these grasslands, sheltering in the sholas, and there may be itinerant herds of elephants and gaur too, not to mention small numbers of wild pig and Sambar deer, which can be seen occasionally feeding out on the grass. Tahr are endemic to these areas and small herds of them can be seen lining the rocky ramparts, silhouetted against the evening light. The ease with these animals negotiate the slippery,

rocky out-crops and the speed with which they run up and down the sheer cliffs make you wonder if, of all animals they alone are exempt from the law of gravity. Leopards, who are their chief predators, surely have a tough time catching them, and all too often must satisfy themselves by feasting on the fawns and the sick and dying adults. But human predation, as in the case of the Kurinji, is quite another story: At the time of writing this, indiscriminate hunting and the subtler

but much more vicious habitat destruction have reduced these animals to the verge of extinction. This day the rain did stop as we had expected, and we did come across a small herd of Tahr. They took off as soon as they caught sight of us and we had to be satisfied with looking at them through our binoculars. By now, the weather had cleared miraculously and a bright sun had come out. We took our equipment out and started back, keeping a sharp eye out for wild flowers.

Floral diversity

July to December also sees a large number of other wild flowers in full bloom all over the grasslands of South Indian hill-tops. This virtually turns each of these areas into a veritable ‘Valley of Flowers’. Many of these flowers are endemic species and a few of them are also very rare and endangered. One such is the terrestrial orchid *Disperis neilgherrensis* which is encountered in small numbers here and there on the edges of sholas. The grassland is also home to a large variety of *Impatiens* species (Balsams), many of which grow in the moist soil near streams and rivulets, or on little islands of earth and stone in the middle of some of these streams, or sometimes out of crevices on the rocky walls. These fragile plants produce very colourful flowers -- cream or white, and every shade of pink and red - and they go a long way towards enlivening grassland treks.

Other interesting species include many types of terrestrial orchids, like the white *Habenaria*, and the usually pinkish red *Satyrium nepalense* with its fleshy flowers.

Then there are the colourful *Osbeckia* species of which many types can be seen in different colours. Other flowers encountered in season include the *Ranunculus* species which represent the Buttercups, and now and then you will come across large, pink, spectacular clumps of *Pedicularis zeylanica*. And in the sholas you will find various kinds of arboreal orchids and epiphytes.

Anyone who seeks flowers in the grasslands of the Western Ghats need never be disappointed, but if you happen to be one of them, make sure that you walk carefully and keep an eye out for possible trouble. There are poisonous snakes in the grass and you must step carefully and watch where you put your foot. Also, the ground is likely to be very slippery and there may be pits and crevices hidden by the grass and stepping into them unawares might well result in a broken ankle or worse. Predators like tigers and leopards are rarely if ever seen though on occasion we may come across signs of their passing: a pug mark deeply imprinted on the wet mud,

the day-old scat of some large cat in the middle of a path, the half-eaten carcass of a deer, a drag mark dotted with fresh blood, a flash of yellow behind a patch of green in the distance that is gone so fast that you wonder if you imagined it. Herds of elephants pose a greater danger and coming across one without warning round a bend in a shola can be rather tricky. But out on the grassland they stand out conspicuously and are easily avoided.

Nights on the hill-top can be very cold and inhospitable, and it is important to find some shelter by sun-set. Temperatures may fall drastically and the threat of unpredictable rain is always something to keep in mind. People caught out in the grassland without shelter in bad weather have been known to die of exposure before day-break. If you are lucky you might find accommodation, as we did, in the fishing hut, by prior permission.

The fire-place, especially, offers a warm welcome to the bone-weary trekker. Nothing can beat the sheer luxury of a plate of hot *kanji* (rice gruel) and pickle consumed at leisure with your feet placed next to a blazing hearth. Talk around such supper time invariably centers around the sights seen during the daylight hours and anticipated experiences waiting to be born with the new day. Now and then the more adventurous ones may open the door of the hut and step out, only to be greeted with the forbidding chill outside. And afterwards, as the fire dies down, it is time to slip into the sleeping bag and to drape a thick rug over it for good measure. And so to sleep... perchance to dream.... the stillness of the night disturbed only by the wailing of the wind upon the hillocks and the patter of dew or rain on the roof. *Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new...*

Afterword

Time passes, and its passage invariably leaves its mark on man's life. Natives of these hills have, over many years in the past, used the twelve-year flowering cycle of the Kurinji to indicate time past. "Two Kurinji ago," they might say, or "three Kurinji ago" to indicate events that happened roughly 25 or 35 years ago. The last flowering which I witnessed was the one in the year 2006. The next one, in 2018, was a time of heavy rainfall and flooding in our State, and therefore I was not able to experience it. The next one is expected to take place in the months of August to October in 2030. One wonders if it will be possible for me to see it, since old age and attendant disabilities are imponderables and must ever remain so. What if I will not be able to experience the grand event ever again? What will happen? The answer, of course, is, Nothing.

*".... For nature, heartless, witless nature,
Will neither care nor know
What stranger's feet may find the meadow
And trespass there and go,
Nor ask amid the dews of morning
If they are mine or no."*

—AE Housman.



THE TIGERS OF BANDHAVGARH

Preface

I first visited Bandhavgarh in 1991, in my Maruti-800, along with my wife and not-yet-seven-years-old daughter. We were driving over from Trivandrum, in Kerala State, almost at the southernmost tip of India. We came via Bengaluru-Hyderabad-Nagpur-Jabalpur, halting *en route* at homes of friends or in hotels. From Jabalpur, we first went to Kanha NP. After spending a week in Kanha, we drove on to Bandhavgarh.

It was a very interesting and exciting trip indeed that we made 31 years ago. It was a challenge especially to make it in a Maruti-800 (at a time when the only other cars available to most Indians were the Hindustan Ambassador and the Premier Fiat models). The total distance each way was around 3000 km, including some deviations. The small car had two cans, each of 10 litres, one filled with drinking water and the other with Petrol,



On the way, Aparna and Unni monkeying around



Aparna and Kuttappan on the young tusker Sidhnath.



stowed behind the back seat. (On reflection, and with the wisdom of hindsight, I can see that this was a very dangerous thing to do, and prohibited by law as well, but none of that had occurred to us at that time.) The seat itself was set up with pillows and cushions so that my six-year-old could play or sleep there in comfort. Every inch of available space was crammed with all sorts of essentials, including



All the way from Trivandrum in our Maruti 800. The picture above was taken somewhere close to Tala, a bit off the road. It was an almost dry nulla. Local people later identified it as the Charanganga stream apparently originating at the Śeṣ Śaya

food. We were out of our home for almost forty days all told.

We were accompanied by our close friend Unnikrishnan, a Jack of all trades and a Master of many, without whose advice, help





Distant view of Bandhavgarh fort



A hidden presence

and never-failing encouragement, such a journey at such a time could not have been undertaken. It was mid-summer and though the small car had an A/C, it couldn't deal adequately with the terrible heat in the areas we were traversing. Nagpur city, for example had a temperature of 46 degrees on the day we reached there.

In Kanha, we met the then warden, an excellent officer named Rajesh Gopal, IFS., who later went on to head Project Tiger. He was very kind and accommodating and made our stay there very pleasant and hassle-free. When we left Kanha, he kindly gave me a letter of introduction to one Mr. Uchadiya who was at that time the "*Chotta Saab*" (Assistant Director of the National Park and resident officer on the spot) in Bandhavgarh. This was especially useful since we knew nothing about Bandhavgarh except that there were tigers there. We had no reservations or anything else. Thankfully, there were only a small number of visitors then, the huge rush of tourists which Bandhavgarh experiences was still in the future. There were very few lodging places and virtually no resorts that I can remember. We were to be put up in the Forest Department Guest House, but that building was, unfortunately, closed for repairs. So we got accommodation in a nearby lodging place, whose name I have forgotten. And no wonder: it was called a resort, but it was a "resort" only in name. Even the food which they served now and then, and usually after repeated requests, and sometimes threats, was horrible. Only the fact that we were the *Chotta Saab*'s personal friends, so to speak, made our stay there bearable.

But our wildlife experience was out of this world! The Head Mahavat Kuttappan (in

English, the word "Mahavat" is usually written as "Mahout") originally belonged to our native State, Kerala, and spoke our mother-tongue *Malayalam*. Although all school students in Kerala are taught Hindi, it is bookish Hindi and not spoken Hindi. So old timers like me were usually able to read a story by, say, Munshi Prem Chand, but would find it difficult to ask for a cup of tea from a roadside tea-shop. (These days things have certainly improved thanks to *Door Darshan* and Cable TV. Now most of our youngsters are fluent in spoken Hindi.) Mahavat Kuttappan took good care of us and made sure that we had good sightings every day during our stay.

The story begins

"Come round at 4 p.m. and we shall go and see the tiger". These confident words were spoken by Kuttappan, the Head "Mahout" (or "Mahavat" in Hindi, the local language) in charge of the trained elephants of Bandhavgarh National Park, a short dark man with a colourful personality and an even more colourful manner of expressing himself. We had just driven over in a car from Jabalpur, and even the relatively short drive in the heat of the summer day had been exhausting. The words of the Mahout, therefore, served only to irritate us. Was he trying to pull our legs? We had wandered extensively in the forests of southern India for several years without ever having encountered a tiger. And here was a man speaking about it as though we were about to visit a relative in a neighbouring house! The words failed to carry conviction. Still, after settling down in our room, and after getting a reasonably good lunch under our belts, we felt more optimistic and at exactly 4 p.m. we presented ourselves at the Park gates.



Tiger asleep in the morning, after having finished off a Chital kill



Tiger in evening light

Tiger-show

At the park gates we collected the tickets and the mandatory guide, a local boy with very little English. Directed by this boy, I drove the car to a spot five or six kilometers inside the forest where three riding elephants were waiting. We chose Kuttappan's elephant, a young tusker named Sidhnath, just eight years old. As soon as we had settled down on the makeshift howdah, Sidhnath started moving off into the forest. For the next ten minutes or so we were kept busy ducking branches and blocking boughs as

the young animal, marvellously responsive to every word and nudge of the mahout, walked quickly through the rugged jungle trail. Then, as we were about to cross a small stream, Kuttappan halted the elephant with a muted command and turning to us whispered, "There he is". We looked and were stunned to see, just a few metres away from us in the stream, a young male tiger. His beautiful, striped body was partly submerged as he regarded us through half-closed eyes, obviously irritated at the unwelcome intrusion. But he made no

A tiger in the tall grass. This photograph shows a tiger lying up in the grass to escape the terrible heat of summer. The earth is marshy where the grass grows and tigers spend most of the daylight hours in summer sheltering deep within such areas, or immersed in streams that haven't yet dried up. This tiger, well hidden from view, was spotted from elephant back by Aparna who was just over six years old at that time. We passed quite close to this spot without seeing the hidden animal. But Aparna, who was more interested in how the walking elephant dropped dung on the move spotted the tiger almost directly underneath and pointed it out to us.



Barka, the big one



move except to open his eyes and glower at us from time to time. We waited there for a few minutes, savouring in absolute silence our first encounter with a wild tiger. Face to

face with the splendid predator, it was difficult to believe that there are human beings who actually find pleasure in killing these beautiful and majestic beasts.

Land of the White Tiger

Bandhavgarh is a small national park, with a core area of 105 km² which nestles among the hills of the Vindhyan ranges of Shahdol district in Madhya Pradesh. This sanctuary is about two hundred kilometres by road from Jabalpur on the Satna - Shahdol state highway. Formerly the hunting preserve of the Maharajas of Rewa, it was declared a national park in 1968. Today it is justifiably famous for its population of wild tigers. Indeed, it was from forests about

sixty kilometres away from this park that the Maharaja Martand Singh of Rewa captured a white tiger in 1951. All the white tigers in zoos all over the world today are descendants of this captive white tiger who was given the name 'Mohan'. No more white tigers have been found in the wild since then, though there have been unauthenticated stories of tourists seeing tigers with unusually pale pigmentation.

Bandhavgarh down the ages

But tigers there are in Bandhavgarh in plenty. And the visitor who goes there to see this most beautiful of predators in the wild will not be disappointed. Bandhavgarh may be a small national park, but it is nevertheless an enchanting one. At the centre of the park is the Bandhavgarh fort which is believed to be (with what degree of veracity I don't know) around two thousand years old. According to mythology, the fort, designed and built by monkey architects at the behest of Sree Rama, was given by Rama to his brother Lakshmana, and this legend is probably the source of its name (Bandhav = Brother, Garh = Fort). Over the centuries the fort came under the rule of a succession of dynasties of which the last were the Baghels, the ancestors of the present royal family of Rewa to whom the fort still belongs. Under

the Baghel kings, Bandhavgarh seems to have had a colourful history. The poet Kabir Das stayed there for a time. Later the fort gave asylum to the Begum of Emperor Humayun when she was fleeing from Sher Shah, in commemoration of which the Emperor Akbar issued silver coins. And Tansen, the famed musician of Akbar's court was presented to the Emperor by the ruler of Bandhavgarh as a gesture of goodwill.

When the Baghels shifted their capital from Bandhavgarh to Rewa in 1617, the fort lost its social and political significance, and it gradually became deserted. The forests took over the once busy city and the fort, and the area soon became renowned for its abundance of wildlife. Thereafter, Bandhavgarh and the thirty-two hillocks surrounding it became the private hunting ground of the Rewa royal

family. Some idea of the density of wildlife in this area can be formed when one learns (from books about Bandhavgarh and its history) that it was considered an auspicious accomplishment for each Maharaja to kill a total of 109 tigers during his reign. By 1914, it appears, the Maharaja Venkat Raman Singh was declared to have killed 111 tigers! But since it was the private preserve of the kings, poaching was severely punished, and this gave a measure of protection to the animals of the area, or at any rate those, I presume, that managed to stay out of the royal eyes! But no real steps for their conservation were

taken until 1968, when the area was declared a national park.

Today, with a total area of over 450 km², Bandhavgarh is a well-run national park attracting a few thousand visitors every year. The best time for a visit is from February to early June, although by April the days are uncomfortably hot with the temperature soaring to around 40 degrees C. The winter months are decidedly more pleasant, but winter nights and dawns can be freezing cold. The park is closed for monsoon from the end of June to the beginning of November.



Gaur

Tigers galore

The main attraction of Bandhavgarh is the presence within the park area of a large number of tigers. And what they call 'tiger show' has become the park's specialty. Early each morning the Mahouts in the employ of the Forest Department led by Mahavat Kuttappan ride on their elephants into the forest looking for signs of the predator. They follow spoor or look in

places where, in their experience, tigers are likely to be found. Once a tiger is located, they communicate with one other and with the command post through their walkie-talkies. Visitors are then conveyed to a point closest to the place where the tiger is to be found, and from there they are taken to the spot on elephant back.

Locating tigers at dawn

Fortunately, I was able to procure permission from the authorities to accompany the mahouts on their early morning foray into the forest in search

of tigers. This can be really exciting and rewarding. During the winter months, especially, when it gets very cold in Bandhavgarh, it is an incredibly bracing



experience to get up before daybreak and join the grumbling and cursing mahouts in their search. On most days, the party successfully tracks down one or more tigers, though rarely they may return without locating even one. This possibility of failure adds to the excitement of the quest, whereas the usual 'tiger show' all too soon begins to resemble a visit to the zoo. In view of its demeaning nature and the adverse effect it can have on

tigers in general, I understand that the 'tiger show' has been discontinued. Today, visitors are taken into the park, either in vehicles or on elephant back, and tiger sighting has once again become a matter of luck. This may cause disappointment to the casual tourist who is bent on seeing a tiger, but in the last analysis, this is more thrilling, more natural, and more beneficial to wildlife than the contrived display of a cornered cat.

Tigers, in summer and winter

During summer, when it is uncomfortably hot in Bandhavgarh, tigers usually spend the daylight hours resting or sleeping in the wet marshland among the tall grass, or half immersed in the cool water of shallow streams. Many of them have become habituated to elephants loaded with tourists and scarcely move a whisker at the intrusion.

Some, however, are less tolerant and turn violent, and the mahouts are careful to give them a wide berth. Once the summer is over, and winter sets in after the rains, the tigers become more active and are less frequently met with. But when they are encountered in winter, they make a most marvellous sight, and appear to glow with health and gracefulness in their thick winter coat.



'Barka' the Big One

There are at least half a dozen tigers operating in the tourist zone of the park, and the mahouts know them all by sight. Each animal has been given a name too, and they discuss them and their deeds as we would discuss our friends. (I must admit that I found this system of naming wild animals a bit off-putting.) One evening we were returning from our evening drive and it was getting dark. We must have been about two kilometres from the exit point when I glimpsed some movement in the scrub a few feet off the track. I reversed the vehicle slowly. Suddenly, unexpectedly, we came upon a huge, male tiger, almost within touching distance, too close in fact for comfort. He was resting, head up and ears alert, gazing majestically in our direction. Our local guide was literally trembling with fright, as he whispered urgently, "Don't stop!

Please keep driving, sir; it is *Barka*, the Big One, the oldest and biggest tiger in this area. He is temperamental and if he gets irritated, he will charge..." But the sight of the majestic animal was so captivating that, scared as I was, I could not make myself drive on. We stopped the car and took several photographs of the magnificent animal in the waning light. At first he seemed to tolerate our presence, but after a time, perhaps annoyed by the sound of the camera, he turned to snarl at us, whereupon we moved respectfully away. The forest belongs to the animals who live in it. We who go there, however well-intentioned we may be, are intruders, and it is the height of bad manners to tease them, annoy them and to outstay our welcome. It is a pity that the peanut-crunching crowds of tourists who shout and sing and blare horns within wildlife sanctuaries do not realize this.

Faunal Diversity

A good population of a predator species like the tiger implies an abundance of prey animals in the area. In Bandhavgarh, the tigers prey mostly on wild pig, sambar and spotted deer, not to mention smaller creatures like langur monkeys, barking deer and peafowl. These herbivores also support a number of smaller predators like the leopard (which is almost totally nocturnal and is therefore rarely met with in the park,) the wild dog, the jackal and the jungle cat. The sloth bear too is not uncommon in the park. Aside from deer and

pig, Bandhavgarh has small numbers of other grass-eaters like the Gaur (often wrongly called 'bison'), Chausingha or Four-horned antelope, Chinkara or the Indian gazelle and Nilgai or Blue-bull. The park abounds also in birdlife, including many migratory birds, and the checklist already has more than 150 species.

On a Chital Kill

Once, late in the evening, we came across a tiger with a chital kill. It was getting dark and anyway he clearly resented our presence, so we left him to his devices and went away. Next morning, I joined the mahouts in their search. We went to the spot where we had left the tiger the previous evening, but he had left the area dragging his kill with him. For some minutes we followed the spoor, a tricky business in the poor light especially as a tiger at a kill can turn nasty if you stumble upon him by accident. But the mahout and his elephant were quite experienced at this sort of thing and soon we came upon a strange sight. Just in front of us, in a small clearing in the grass, beautifully lit by the first rays of the morning sun, lay our tiger. He was fast asleep. What was unusual and amusing was his pose: he was lying on his back as domestic cats sometimes do with his paws in the air, almost like a human being. Of the chital kill there was no trace, though judging by the tiger's bulging tummy, one could guess what had happened to it.

Often, the casual visitor who comes to Bandhavgarh has to be satisfied with seeing a sleeping tiger. But the more serious enthusiast who spends a few days there can, if he is lucky, watch the beautiful animals at work and play. In the evening, as the sun is about to set, the sleeping tiger wakes up and comes into his own. The thrilling sight of a tiger stalking or chasing langur or spotted deer could be the reward of many days of patient watching and waiting. Wild animals are not

circus performers waiting to perform for the entertainment of visiting VIPs. To see them at all is a rare privilege, and it is a privilege which is likely to become even rarer in future.

The Fort

To visitors who are interested in archaeology, a trek to the Bandhavgarh fort will be a fascinating experience. The fort which is in the heart of the park still belongs, by a strange anomaly, to the Maharaja of Rewa. In order to visit it, therefore, the permission of his representative is to be obtained. The track leading to the fort is a steep one and is strewn with shrines and statues, many of them depicting the various incarnations of Vishnu, and all dating from the tenth century onwards. At the base of the fort from where the path starts, there is an eleven-metre-long sandstone statue of 'Śeṣ Śaya', Vishnu reclining on the serpent Śeṣ. This stone statue is also believed to date back to the 10th Century CE. Just beneath this statue is a rectangular perennial tank of excellent water which supplies the *Charanganga* stream. We were told that water from this tank is siphoned off through pipes to serve the needs of the forest department officials and employees residing at Tala. And yet it never dries up in summer or overflows in the rainy season.

Aside from good opportunities for wildlife viewing and exploring fascinating archaeological sites, Bandhavgarh also offers

the visitor superb scenic beauty. The Sal and mixed forests as well as the grasslands make a pleasing sight to which the sheer rocky sides of Bandhavgarh hill with the fort and temple at the top act as a strange kind of backdrop. The beauty of the scenery is always enlivened for the tourist by the prospect of encountering a wild animal round every corner. This must be one of the reasons why those who have visited the place return to it year after year

Consequences of unbridled tourism

Tourism oriented development spells certain ruin to wildlife sanctuaries; and this threat looms large over the future of Bandhavgarh. Already in recent years, many new facilities have come up in and around the little village to cater to the steadily increasing tourist population. This sort of thing eats into the 'wildness' of a wild place, which was its attraction to begin with, and slowly transforms the wilderness into an imitation-city where tourists coming from Bombay or Calcutta may feel at home. This has already happened to many once-enchanting places of our country; and the same fate awaits many others unless we learn to view a visit to a wildlife sanctuary as an educational experience and not just as an occasion to get drunk and sing and shout and generally 'have some fun'. We must teach our children that it is their sacred duty to preserve inviolate the few remaining wildernesses of our country. Conservation is, after all, only enlightened self-interest; when we protect forests, we are in fact protecting and preserving our own future, a truth which

and never seem to tire of it.

Anyone who writes about Bandhavgarh will certainly have to say something about Kuttappan, the colourful Head-Mahavat of the park. This man's instinctive understanding of tigers and their ways is quite astonishing, and his word on the matter is relied on by his superiors in the department. But Kuttappan's various accomplishments require a separate section all to himself.

we all too often forget, or fail to realize. Bandhavgarh is not included under 'Project Tiger', India's most successful conservation project of recent times. This seems to me to be a serious omission. One can only hope that this omission will be rectified in the near future. The more stringent conservation measures which this project entails will go a long way in preserving unspoilt the peacefulness and the beauty of Bandhavgarh.

Kuttappan

I got acquainted with Kuttappan in 1991, during my first visit to Bandhavgarh.. He was born and brought up somewhere in Kerala. Early in life he ran away from home and eventually reached Parambikulam wildlife sanctuary where he attached himself to a mahout working for the forest department. The boy helped the mahout and family in household work and also in looking after the elephants under the mahout's charge. Some months later, a contingent from the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department reached Kerala

to finalize the buying of a few elephants, Madhya Pradesh being a State that has no wild elephant population. The formalities completed, the contingent returned home along with the mahout who was requisitioned to help them with the elephants, and Kuttappan too to help the mahout. In a month or two, the elephants having been settled in in their new home, the mahout returned to Parambikulam, but Kuttappan opted to stay on in Madhya Pradesh. In course of time, he grew to adulthood, obtained a job as mahout in the Forest Department, moved with the elephant in his charge to Bandhavgarh, married a local woman, and after years of service rose to the position of "Head *Mahavat*" of Bandhavgarh. That is when we met him: me, my wife and our seven-year-old daughter having driven up all the way to Bandhavgarh in our Maruti-800, the car filled to bulging with stuff intended to see us through the forty-day driving holiday.

Kuttappan was very gracious and friendly to us from the start. On all the five or six days we spent there, he made it a point to take us into the forest on his elephant whenever we weren't doing the customary Safari drive. He gave my not-yet-seven-year-old daughter joy rides on the elephant calf Sidhnath, much to her delight.

The fact that Sidhnath was eight years old at the time meant more to her than adults can imagine.

Tala, the entry point to Bandhavgarh NP is situated is a small village with a few shops, eateries and a couple of lodging places. At least it was so over thirty years ago, though I am sure things have changed a lot in the



Head Mahavat Kuttappan seated on Sidhnath holding his Olympus ON-1 camera.

intervening time, and it wouldn't surprise me if Tala is today a mini city. One thing noticeable in those days was that there were no young girls to be seen anywhere in the village. Boys, yes, of every age, but as for girls only the very small ones of the primary school age were visible. We asked Kuttappan about it, the presence of whose thirteen years old daughter was an exception to the rule. We were told that the Zamindars of the area made sporadic visits and if any grown-up girl should be seen, they would carry her away and keep her with them as a sex toy for a time before returning her to her parents. So girls on the brink of puberty were sent away to live with relatives far away. "What about your daughter?", we asked Kuttappan. "Elephants", was his terse reply. If you think about it, there is no surprise here. No one in his right mind wants an argument with a man on whose side there are half a dozen elephants ready to go on rampage at a nudge of his toe, or an undecipherable or whispered word of command from him.

An amazing thing about Kuttappan was that he was an ace photographer. This might not be quite so amazing today when, thanks to technological advancements in the form of smart phones, anyone with a mobile thinks of himself as an ace photographer. And the all-manual cameras available in those days cost much less than our smart phones today. A grateful foreigner had gifted him an SLR, the once famous Olympus OM-1, and a short telephoto lens, and Kuttappan had taught himself the science and the art of photography. He had a huge collection of slides, jaw-dropping in content and quality, some of which were subsequently used even by the BBC, and the National Geographic,

not to mention a host of lesser publishers. Kuttappan always had a good stash of transparency film, usually supplied by amazed foreigners. When we visited him, it was in scalding hot summer. Keeping film safe and unspoilt was always a touchy issue in very hot climates. I had taken mine in an ice box in which fresh ice had to be filled from time to time. I found that Kuttappan had a solution to this problem. He had buried a large mud jug in a corner of his unplastered living room floor, with only its neck above the surface. The film was kept inside this jug, and earth around the jug was watered every day and always kept wet. The film rolls inside were kept very cool and indeed it was the next best thing to keeping them inside a fridge.

A year later, I visited Bandhavgarh again, this time in the company of a couple of friends, during a bitterly cold winter. One of them was Prof. Kunhikrishnan, who headed the Zoology Department of the University College, Trivandrum, and a well-known environmental activist. The other was Dr. Kunhikannan, renowned as a plant taxonomist and who was at that time a scientist working for the Institute of Deciduous Forests in Jabalpur. Once again Kuttappan took us in hand. He insisted that we should have all our meals at his house every day. After much protest and argument, it was decided that we would have supper every night at his house during our stay.

Kuttappan habitually spoke in a mixture of Malayalam and Hindi for our benefit, but his obscene expletives when angry were pure Malayalam regardless of the context, as we had occasion to witness many times. Once the Commissioner of the area (a senior bureaucrat

with three or even more District Collectors under his charge) came on a visit. We were waiting at the Park gate for our Safari vehicle, which unknown to us had been commandeered for the Commissioner's entourage. The Personal Secretary of the great man talked to Kuttappan and ordered him to show the Commissioner as many tigers as possible. Kuttappan resented the tone of command, and he replied loudly in Malayalam: "Mother #@**&%, has the anonymous bugger who sired you brought and set free any tigers in these forests for your viewing pleasure?" Then he threw us a sideways glance to make sure that we had heard him. And sure enough, after taking the guests on elephant back for an hour and a half, along a deliberately chosen vicious and inhospitable terrain – and negotiating bad terrain on a fast moving elephant is no joke – he brought them back without any tiger sighting. "The tiger was right there", he told us later, "but I did not point him out to the sonofabitches." One thing was certain: in Bandhavgarh, if you rubbed Kuttappan up the wrong way, you would end up paying for it one way or the other.

At this time, there was a tussle brewing between the RO in charge of the elephants on one side and Kuttappan and the other mahouts on the other. The RO took it upon himself to stop the wheat ration for the elephants on the grounds that the elephants usually foraged in the adjoining forests and got most of their food by such means, and so there was no need for the additional wheat ration. Kuttappan was very agitated and he spoke with great emotion about this outrageous reform: "See what that Devil's Piss has done! The poor, inarticulate animals! Who will speak for them? Has he no

eyes to see their suffering? One thing I assure you: till he reinstates the ration and gives the poor animals what is their due, not one elephant here will stir out into the forests. That is certain."

And so we decided to leave Bandhavgarh the next day. It looked as if this issue was set to grow into something uglier, with a strike of sorts by the mahouts followed by punitive action by the higher-ups. We didn't want to get caught up in all that. So that night, we told Kuttappan that we would be leaving Bandhavgarh the next morning. He tried to dissuade us, but he too agreed that the problem was bound to snowball and there was no telling how it was going to end.

Supper at Kuttappan's was an elaborate affair. The three of us would sit on a bench pulled into the middle of the living room, with a sturdy table in front of us. Kuttappan would seat himself on a chair facing us, with a huge cup of Mahua liquor (made from the flowers of *Madhuca longifolia*) which he would keep sipping, and replenishing it as soon as it was over, while keeping on offering some to us. The replenishing was done by the mahouts under his command: they would appear magically with their pitchers like genies from Arabian Nights and they never let Kuttappan's cup run dry. Then his wife would bring the food: first Chappathies, and dal. Then would come rice, and sambar made specially for us by Kuttappan himself. On this last evening, the lady of the house came in with rice as the first course. There was a fast exchange in Hindi between her and Kuttappan, and then Kuttappan turned to us and said apologetically: "Today there is only rice. The wheat is finished."

Afterword

When I visited Bandhavgarh the second time in the winter of 1992, it was already attracting a large number of tourists, though with practically no tourist infrastructure to accommodate such heavy traffic. Things must have changed drastically by now, and no doubt for the worse. Tala, where the entry point to the sanctuary lay in those days, which had just one private lodging place and a few eateries housed in little shanties, must have developed over the years into something like a town. I don't know, three decades have passed since my last visit. In the meantime, on the plus side, Bandhavgarh was made a part of the Project Tiger network in 1993.

The fame of Bandhavgarh as a “must go” place for tigers has continued to grow and is still growing. I am told too that the total area of the national park has been increased from what it was before (450km²) to 1536 km². Photography, which was a niche hobby in those days, and not very popular since it entailed a rather heavy monetary outlay, has become almost universal now, when armed with high quality mobile cameras, every man and his brother, and every woman too, have become avid “photo-takers” though mostly such photos are mug shots of themselves, the so called “selfies”. But more seriously, all the once wild areas of the country now teem with long telephoto- toting youngsters who have only one question to ask if they accost you: *sher mila apko?* Did you get a tiger? The preponderance of these “tiger wallahs”, who are bothered about no other living thing in a forest gives a bad name even to serious photographers who go about their work with care and circumspection, never disturbing wildlife or other visitors. However, in most wildlife parks it is a different story. A dozen or more Jeeps corner

tigers, and photographers and other visitors wait with bated breath till they are finally rewarded with a fleeting darśan: 30 square centimeters of striped hide slinking away in the scrub. A few years ago, in Corbett National Park, one youngster passing by in his jeep alongside our vehicle grinned broadly at us and shouted, “We made it!”, in an effort to indicate that he had been vouchsafed such a glimpse of the most sought after feline in the country.

Indeed, photography may yet turn out to be the bane of our forests, from which conservationists may have to try and protect wildlife. The role played by wildlife photography and photographers in conservation over the years cannot be gainsaid. But we have to regretfully admit that things have changed now. There are simply too many photographers, too much activity, too virulent competition, too ruthless an attitude of ‘get the picture at any cost’. There appears to be scarcely any concern for the welfare of the wildlife they are photographing, or for the disturbance to the peace and quiet of which their restless and noisy scurrying about is the main cause. Perhaps the time may soon come when conservationists are forced to lobby for the prohibition of camera lenses inside sanctuaries on the ground that they are only slightly less harmful than guns. And what a pity that would be!

Tiger wallahs also encourage, and indulge in another offensive activity, though one that is less harmful to wildlife than those associated with unethical “photo-maniacal” pursuit of wildlife. They nickname tigers. Can there be anything more disgusting than to call a wild tigress “Chandni” or an adult male tiger “Saddam Hussain?” If there is, I am sorry to say that I can't think of any right now.



Hello Happiness!

DARJEELING

On the train

On April 26th 1990, three friends started on a journey to Darjeeling. One of them was me. The others were Prof. Kunhikrishnan, who taught zoology in the University college, Trivandrum, and Ravishankar, a well-known journalist. Our intention was to go on from Darjeeling on the *Sandakphu* trek. We boarded a once-a-week train at Trivandrum; our destination was New Jalpaiguri, a long haul of almost three days. The days in the train weren't physically unpleasant, though a bit boring. On the whole it wasn't very hot and the landscape we traversed was rich and interesting. Since

our train had started six hours later than the scheduled time, we were able to sleep through the familiar terrain, and keep awake as we moved along strange places. Things got particularly interesting once we entered Orissa. The whole landscape seemed to turn lush and wet, with a profusion of water-birds everywhere—Cormorants, Large Egrets, Jacanas, Lapwings, and in West Bengal, Adjutant Storks. There were also plenty of scavenger vultures worrying cattle carcasses. On 28th evening, so my travel diary tells me, around 5 p.m., near the river *Suvarna Rekha*, I was delighted to see, basking in the cool breeze which gently ruffled his fur, a Jackal!



On the road

From Siliguri to Kalimpong by bus

Finally we disembarked in New-Jalpaiguri, and thence made our way to Siliguri, a small town which seemed to be in danger of choking in its own filth. Soon it started to rain, and the bus to Darjeeling had a very long queue of passengers waiting for it, so we decided to go to Kalimpong instead. The small, mini-bus to Kalimpong was crammed full of people too, and the winding roads were littered with large potholes, in spite of the big boards posted along the way every few kilometres saying, "Border Roads Organization/Is Pride of the Nation!" (Indeed it seemed as if the Chief of

the Border Roads Organization had an itch to make and exhibit more and more boards along the way. We saw philosophical exhortations like "Life is a challenge, Accept it!" Some were more sobering and realistic, though: "Beware of shooting boulders!" and "Rock-fall area, look out for falling rocks!" Such admonitions were made even more terrifying by the presence of boulders and pieces of rock on the road). But the scenery as we climbed was indeed breathtaking. Down below us flowed the river Teesta. And dotted on the roadside were small, beautiful houses. Sometimes we could see passersby on the winding roads.

Kalimpong

The small town of Kalimpong was at this time laboring under the shadow of the Goorkha-land agitations, and the sporadic violence and looting that accompanied it. All the shops closed at 6:30 p.m., and the owner of the tiny lodge where we secured accommodation for the night warned us against wandering around after dark. The warning however was redundant in our case since we were bushed after the long journey, and after an early supper, we retired to bed.

Come morning, we wandered around sight-seeing, though there were no sights in the usual sense for us to see. But what we did see was a slice of daily life as actually lived by the people of Kalimpong. By about 7:30 a.m., children in uniform began lining the roads, waiting for their school buses, belonging to schools with quaint names like "Shangri-La". Women could be seen gathering water from



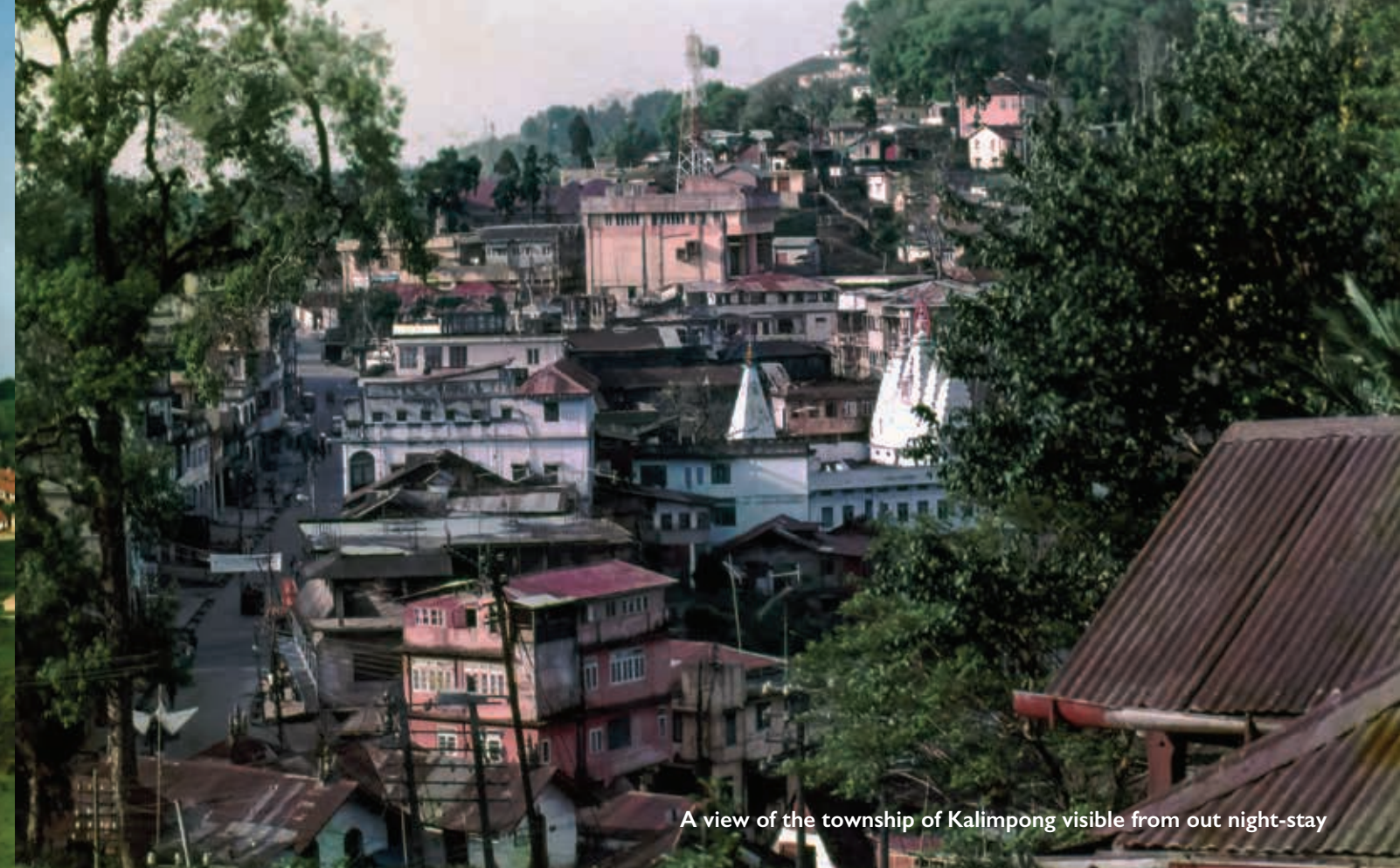
Out for a walk with grandpa



Children posing in Maey Bhajyang



Lebung Race Course in the distance



A view of the township of Kalimpong visible from out night-stay



Chowrasta long ago. No doubt things have changed by now

water lines on the roadside, broken, perhaps deliberately, to enable them to do so. We had our breakfast in a small restaurant. We had checked out from our Lodge already, and after breakfast we went to the bus stand, stood in a long queue and secured tickets for the bus, and waited. The bus from Darjeeling apparently hadn't yet arrived. If it failed to arrive, as often happened, tickets or no tickets, there will be no bus to Darjeeling. After waiting for some time in the bus stand, we decided to wait in front of the Jeep-booking place, having reconciled ourselves to a gut-wrenching ride in a jam-packed jeep which looked ready to fall apart at the seams, when a small boy, who had overheard us seeking information about the Darjeeling bus appeared out of nowhere to tell us that the awaited bus had arrived. As we made haste to board the bus, a violent fight broke out right

next to it over what I took to be an attempted pick-pocketing. In the commotion, we lost track of our benefactor, the young boy, who had disappeared into the crowd even as he had appeared out of it. The little guy, perhaps ten or twelve years old, must have been a coolie, making his living by unloading luggage off the buses, and he had neglected that work and the money he might have earned by coming to inform us of the arrival of the bus. And he had left without even waiting for a word of thanks from us. This boy's act of gratuitous kindness might indeed be typical of the hill-folk, I thought to myself, or at any rate those hill-folk who hadn't become corrupted by the bane of tourism and the "make money at any cost" ethos that invariably accompanies it. Anyway, after waiting for some more time, and a four hour long unpleasant though uneventful bus journey, we finally got down at the Darjeeling

bus station.. Then following the repeated directions of local people whose fore-fingers pointed implacably heavenwards, we trudged

up a steep and winding road towards our Shangri-La during our stay there, the Youth Hostel.

Darjeeling: Youth Hostel

At the Youth Hostel, we were shown to our dormitory beds. It wasn't crowded with tourists, but it wasn't empty either. There was a bearded man in one corner, a couple of women from some European country, and a couple of Japanese too. The larger and older Japanese gentleman appeared to subscribe to some form of Buddhism of which the only thing I could understand was that it was NOT Zen. The younger man who appeared to venerate the older person was perhaps the latter's disciple. Conversation with them was difficult since they had practically no English. The older one had a prayer drum with a mantra written on it on one side in Japanese, and probably the same thing written phonetically in Sanskrit on the other side. He claimed that the phonetic rendering IS Sanskrit. When I expressed disagreement, he bowed to me and said "Namaste" in a feeble voice. He used that word "Namaste" quite often, and indeed he appeared to consider it a kind of password to the Indian ethos. Throughout the exchange he kept beating on the drum almost absentmindedly.

The bearded man turned out to be an Australian, and more dangerously, a writer on religious topics. He had written four books and was working simultaneously on two more, all on comparative religion, of which in his brief conversation with me he betrayed no grasp. He showed me one of his works which I perused carefully, much to his sulky

satisfaction. It was all about the "Christ in us", and the truth of the Second Coming which he seemed to relate in some mysterious way to *Patanjali* and to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* of Mahayana Buddhism. He had the eyes of a fanatic and I didn't bother to engage in a longer conversation with him than was indicated by good manners. But his disposition, formerly resentful, mellowed to a semblance of friendliness after our exchange.

We went out 'sight-seeing' in Darjeeling township to stock up for the coming trek, and we also made use of that opportunity to have a light breakfast at a small street-side eatery. Darjeeling is certainly not easy on your legs or your lungs. It is full of ups and downs. The main area where people get together is the Chowrasta—Mall road where you find all the shops and other commercial establishments. In the evening you will also find large numbers of Tibetans selling woollens: sweaters, anoraks, caps, stuff like that. All three of us bought an anorak each which was to stand us in good stead in the coming days. The Chowrasta also was a place where tourists could have their children enjoy pony rides.

Whenever Darjeeling is mentioned, one tends to think of the small and cute hill-train running all the way up from Siliguri in the plains. This is a journey to be embarked on with caution. The landscape is no doubt enchantingly beautiful, or it would have been except for the unsightly aerial cables



Darjeeling, as the hawk sees it



The Toy Train during a halt
inset: Shanthi and Aparna peeping out



A view of Kanchenjunga from Darjeeling



Children at Maney Bhanjyang

and wires which criss-cross one's view throughout the journey, detracting from one's enjoyment. And the journey takes a very long time, probably more than double the time usually necessary to cover the distance. The Toy train also offers a shorter joy ride lasting around two hours and this is more suitable for tourists.

There was a small restaurant perched on the hill-side a short distance away from the Youth Hostel, where we went for a late lunch. It was built most perilously on the hill-side, almost tilting over the abyss, as if waiting for the tiniest tremor which could pitch it tumbling down. I couldn't begin to imagine how many rules must have been broken in its construction. The proprietor had a cute little daughter, about the same age as my Aparna, with whom therefore it was easy for me to make friends. I also

managed to take a portrait of the child who was running around the small room, a joyful grin on her face. (Some years later we went on a family vacation to Darjeeling. We went looking for this restaurant and the grinning child. She had become a school girl and much more shy than before. To our delight, we learnt that her name was ARpana, just a single letter difference from my daughter's name!)

In this restaurant I also met a different kind of traveller, this time a very well educated and cultured Englishman accompanied by his Japanese wife. Steve, for that was his name, worked as a translator in Japan and we had an interesting conversation on a variety of topics: on Japanese poetry and literature in general and on Japanese culture. He told me that he wrote and published Haiku, and they listened with amusement and I guess some shock, and pleasure too, as I expounded on my own

Maney Bhanjyang

Early next morning we bid good bye to the Youth Hostel and set out on our way to Sandakphu. The climb would begin from a little village named Maney Bhanjyang which we reached in a terribly crowded bus. Like in many other places in the North-East, this village was also enlivened by the presence of little children all dressed to go to school. Some of them and their family quite cheerfully posed for me. We ate some breakfast, which to me tasted a bit funny, but I was ravenously hungry and didn't mind the taste. We rested for a while before embarking on the uphill trek.

favourite haiku poet Shiki, with a warmth and a fervour which on reflection makes me feel embarrassed. The couple evinced a lively and informed interest in Kerala which they promised to visit in a couple of years.

That night was very cold and I snuggled into the blankets, fully dressed. After a few hours of deep sleep, I was woken up by a full bladder and the need to relieve myself. There were no lights in the room, and I had lost my torch in Kalimpong. So I stumbled out of bed and somehow made my way to the toilets a little way off, all lined in a row. I blindly pushed my way into one, only to be greeted with a feeble "Namaste" spoken in a falling intonation, which almost made me jump out of my skin. The elder of the two Japanese visitors had eaten something which he shouldn't have and now had the runs in consequence.



River Teesta



Tibetan Wall carpet

MEGHMA — WHERE THE CLOUDS DWELL

When I first staggered into the little village of *Meghma* one rainy evening, I had no idea where I was, and to tell the truth, I did not care. There were three of us friends making the trek and we had been on the move the whole day, trudging up the winding, treacherous track, battling the icy wind and the sharp, driving rain. We had reached the bustling hill-town of Darjeeling five days ago. Our plan was to trek up from Darjeeling to *Sandakphu*, a place at

an altitude of around 13000 feet famed for its breathtaking view of the Himalayas. The lure of the Himalayas lurks deep within the heart of every Indian; and when we read that from *Sandakphu* one could see the peaks of Everest, *Makalu*, *Lhotse*, *Kumbhakarna*, *Kanchenjunga* and *Chomolari* in one single, unbroken stretch of snows, there was no stopping us. We made hasty preparations and set out early in the morning.



A lone horse peers down at us from a high bank

The trek begins

It was a dull day and the cloudy skies promised rain. Still we decided to go ahead with our plans. The actual trek was to begin from *Maney Bhanjyang*, a small village with a chiefly agricultural population. We had breakfast there and after photographing some of the many cute children waiting to go to school, we started on our way by about 10 a.m.. Half an hour later, we were huddled on a bare hill-slope, holding on to the turf for dear life, pummeled by rain and an icy wind.

Things were made seriously difficult because something I had eaten had caused severe gastritis and I threw up several times. Considerably weakened, the heavy backpack was almost too heavy for me to carry. Still I walked on, putting one foot after the next, holding on by sheer will power and the fear of being a burden to my companions. Thankfully, the retching stopped after a time, probably because there was nothing inside me to be expelled, but the weakness persisted

dangerously.

By noon we were a chastened trio, our initial cockiness having been dissolved and washed away by the storm. We were wet through and through, the cold was benumbing and our backpacks were heavy as sin and getting heavier by the minute. Still the view was so spectacular that we often forgot our distress. Now and then we would come across a *chorten*, a small wayside shrine. Once we saw an abandoned monastery, a *gompa* which stood surrounded by a pall of silence. Once a huge Himalayan owl stared unwinkingly at us from its perch on a wayside tree. On another occasion, a strange sound made us turn around only to see a lone horse peering down at us. Sometimes, though not often, we encountered native hill-folk scampering up and down the steep slopes carrying heavy burdens, as nimble and sure-footed as mountain goats. Our own progress was, in comparison, clumsy and slow.

Meghma: home of the clouds

Evening found us still on the move and with no end in sight. Now an element of panic crept in. The cold was getting worse, our fatigue was something palpable, and darkness was fast approaching. We simply had to find a place to spend the night. I was walking ahead and suddenly, as I rounded a bend in the track, I saw, looming out of the mist, the shape of a *gompa* and some scattered buildings. A village at last! I called out to my companions, but when I turned round to show them the village, I found to my

astonishment that it had disappeared as if it had never existed. For a few shocked moments I wondered if I had dreamt it. But no, the village had only been momentarily swallowed up by the thickening mist. Relieved, we slowly walked into the village. Such was my introduction to *Meghma*, 'home of the clouds'.

The village that evening lay dark and silent, and a deathly stillness seemed to pervade the whole scene. Only the mist moved, billowing and dissipating in the whistling wind. There



Our first view of Meghma



Manbahadur Tamang, the Lama of Meghma

did not seem to be anybody in any of the houses. But the first door we pushed at opened inwards to let us into a warm room, in one portion of which was a glowing fire. An elderly couple and a young girl were the only occupants of the house. They looked at us but did not seem surprised at all; the old

The Lama of Meghma

We were sitting in one corner of a rather large room. On one side of us, on an elevated platform, was the kitchen. At the opposite end was what looked like the prayer room. In this part of the room were tables on which were arranged figurines of the Buddha and other deities, several dishes filled with water, a picture of the Dalai Lama, a prayer wheel, a transistor radio and other assorted items of less significance. Presiding over this area was the master of the house, a well-built man of over seventy years with a benevolent expression on his face, who kept muttering prayers under his breath. Indeed, he himself seemed to be an object of worship as occasionally local passers-by entered the room to bow deeply before him and to receive his blessing. The

man gestured to the fire and the girl asked in English if we would like some tea. Beyond that, no one paid any attention to us. The fire soon brought life back into my limbs and the tea brought life back into the rest of my body. After half an hour of rest, we felt strong enough to take in our surroundings.

girl who brought us our tea was his daughter-in-law. “He is a great Lama”, she told us in answer to our whispered question, “the holiest man in this village, the Lama of Meghma.”

It turned out that he was also the main, and perhaps the sole, occupant of that tiny hamlet. He was a householder Lama, a man apparently of great erudition in the Buddhist tradition, which he had acquired in his youth in Tibet. When the Chinese invaded Tibet, he escaped from there with a collection of scriptural texts and other artifacts which are now housed in the gompa, which he built at Meghma for the purpose. Once every year, on *Buddha Purnami*, the scrolls are taken out and ceremoniously read to the accompaniment of much prayer, singing and chanting of hymns.

Buddhism in the North-east and Guru Rinpoche

Padmasambhava, the eighth century Buddhist saint who is believed to have spread Buddhism in Bhutan and North-Eastern India, is one of the most revered deities in this area. Called ‘*Guru Rinpoche*’ or the Great Teacher, he is depicted as

possessing a rather military moustache, which gave his face an air of militancy that seemed to belie the Buddhist ideal of meekness and gentleness. The history of Buddhism once again shows us how the most sublime philosophy and the most perfect ethical



Passers-by come to pay their respects to the Lama



The path passing through Meghma

teaching may be vitiated by the meanness and the innate aggressiveness of man. Within a century of the Buddha's death, his disciples had split into eighteen rival sects eager to spill blood in the name of *karuna*, compassion. The famous Buddhist temple at Kandy in Sri Lanka

The Gompa

When the Lama showed us around the *Gompa*, he drew our attention to a figurine of *Guru Rinpoche* which was present there complete with bulging eyes and moustache and a couple of human skulls for good measure, along with those of other deities who probably represented the more compassionate aspects of Buddhism. He showed us the scriptural texts carefully stored in a cupboard, and then he pointed to the various deities

Life in Meghma

The Lama of Meghma was, however, the very soul of piety. He would start the day early, long before sunrise, with a chant of "*Om Mani Padme Hum*", one of the most important chants in Buddhist worship, and he would murmur incessantly throughout the day, while going about his daily routine or peeling potatoes for the noon meal. In the Bible, (1 Thessalonians 5:16-17) there is an exhortation, "Pray without ceasing". The Lama, in all probability without ever having read the Bible seemed to live up to this precept. (The Buddhist chant, however, appeared to be an instance of the Tantrik *Sandhā bhāṣa*, or 'intentional' use of language, where the words represented things that had nothing to do with their surface

has horrid frescoes, which show a sadistic Buddha torturing heretics in hell. It is a sad truth that in all cultures and at all times, man has always taken care to create his gods in his own image.

represented by figurines: "That is *Bisnuji*", he said, perhaps making allowances for our Hindu origins, "and that is *Shivji*. And that there, my friends, is *Burmaji*". Burma? Of course we did not ask the question out aloud. Some objects in the collection were not conspicuously religious: a couple of Tibetan wall-carpets thread-bare with age and mould, several dishes of water, the grotesque, almost mummified head of what must have been a yak....

meaning: a sort of code used to spell out esoteric stuff, in this case perhaps a reference to sexual intercourse. The lama did not seem aware of this, and for my part, I did not tell him.)

The word 'Meghma' means 'home of the clouds'; an apt name, for the place, situated at an altitude of slightly under 10000 feet, lay perpetually enveloped in cloud, mist and rain. The day temperature was as low as 4°C in the open. And that too at mid-day! Here the Lama had built a small apartment consisting of a couple of rooms on top of his house in order to lodge occasional stragglers like us. He charged a small fee as room-rent and for the food provided. The rooms were

basic structures in concrete, and comfortable enough, but he had omitted to provide stairs through which to access them. So you had first to climb on to a nearby rock, then grab the sun-shade of the house and pull yourself on to the balcony, then effect an entry through the window since the only door to the room could be locked and opened only from the inside. A truly striking example of psychedelic architecture! At first I felt self-conscious performing this gymnastic feat, but nobody seemed to pay any attention to me.

Near the house, there was a stream of clear, cold water. In the morning, we had to use the water of this stream for daily requirements like brushing our teeth etc. This was agony

itself because the water would be freezing cold. But the agony lasted only for the first mouthful. Thereafter, everything was benumbed and you could do even a dental extraction without any problem at all. This water was used by the Lama for irrigating his fields and for the needs of his farm animals: horses, cows and goats. He seemed to have fifty each of these animals; perhaps fifty was regarded as an auspicious number. At night the animals were penned in a make-shift enclosure close by. There were wolves about and the animals too seemed to be aware of the fact. It was a strange and eerie sensation at night to hear the plaintive neighing of the horses and to see their dark, ghost-like forms moving about in the thick mist.

A Lama with a mission

A sort of 'road' starting at Maney Bhanjyang and passing on through Meghma went right up to Sandakphu. I was told that it was constructed long ago by the Aga Khan. This boulder-strewn 'road' is a 'road' only in name and negotiating it in a jeep is a gut-wrenching experience that is best avoided. Every morning, after the daily chores were over, the Lama would dress up in an anorak, take a rolled umbrella and set out for the next village, two arduous hours away along this road. Perhaps, we thought, there is a monastery there, or a group of novices who needed his personal instruction. But no! It turned out that the Lama of Meghma was a compulsive Carrom player! And the daily walk of four hours over a really rough road was undertaken in order to play a game of Carroms! I did not doubt that all through the long walk and the game, his lips and his mind

kept up their perpetual chant of prayer.

At first the lama seemed to resent our presence and appeared reserved and cold. It turned out that he had taken us for Bengalis whom apparently he disliked intensely after an unpleasant incident in which a group of young tourists from Kolkata gave him a lot of trouble by their unruly behaviour. Later, when he learnt that we were from Kerala, he warmed to us. Bengalis, he told us, "have no respect, no silence, no knowledge of right and wrong", and they annoyed him with their "singing, shouting whistling and smoking". But "*aap log*", he said gesturing towards us, "any one can see that you are nobly born". I winced at the word '*kuleen*', wondering uneasily if we did indeed qualify as such. And thinking of the singing, shouting, whistling and smoking multitude back at home who were utterly destitute of silence or respect



The Gomba, and its inside



or ethical consciousness, I blushed at the undeserved praise.

Evening had descended on Meghma, “mother of the clouds”. That morning I had persuaded my friends to carry on without me since the digestive upset had left me feeling not fit enough for the arduous days of the coming trek. I did not want to risk being a dead weight on their shoulders, not to mention

their minds. So they set out on their way, albeit reluctantly, and I was left alone in Meghma. It was to be my last evening there for I was preparing to return to Darjeeling next morning. The farm animals were slowly coming home. The rain had let up for a time, though the wind was still cold and it seemed to bite into me like a knife. But impelled by the sense of beauty, I braved the bitter cold



Dressed for a walk to the nearby village



Guru Rinpoche

and the fur-soft perpetual drizzle and walked out into the night. Outside, the tranquil hills of Meghma lay enveloped in mist, drenched in the pale light of a translucent moon, like something out of a childhood dream, a vision of paradise. It was inexpressibly beautiful. Suddenly, a voice spoke behind me, startling me. It was the Lama of Meghma. “Are you bored and lonely, my child?” he asked with a benign smile. I assured him that, on the contrary, I was admiring the unearthly beauty of the night. “Ah, yes”, he said, “it is such beauty that teaches man to pray. And yet, having learnt to pray, he also kills his brothers in the name of prayer, in the name of *dharm*... In your homeland, do they plunder and kill in the name of *dharm*?” “Yes”, I replied sadly, “though perhaps less often

than in many other places”. He fell quiet for a while. “But how absurd it is to kill and die in the name of *dharm*,” continued the Lama, “seeing that all these different religions are but so many vessels filled at the same stream! And no vessel can contain all the water. And even when your pitchers are all full, there is still plenty of water left in the stream....” These words, however did not make as much of an impression on me as they would have on a more religious soul. I kept silent, staring ahead. There were sad horses standing in the fields, shaking their thick, black manes at us. And as I stood watching, a mist seemed to rise up from beneath the restless motion of their hooves and cover, once again, the dwelling place of the clouds.



RHINO LAND

The elephant we are sitting on moves swiftly through the vegetation. We have been on the prowl for about half an hour and my friends, not used to this form of exercise, have started to feel uncomfortable. Each time our animal takes a step, our bodies are subjected to a three-way shake. Unless one keeps relaxed and sways

with the motion, one will soon start feeling miserable. And in these forests, one has no option but to travel on elephant back. There are no jeep tracks here, no foot-paths, only slushy meadows and swampy thickets and lush forests which only the elephant can traverse. This is rhino land.

Rhino sighting

For some time now, we had been following the Hollong River which in this region is little more than a stream. Suddenly our elderly mahout halted the elephant and pointed with his stick. “Gondar”, he said in Bengali, “Rhino”. We peered eagerly in the direction in which the stick is pointing. At first we didn’t understand what he meant for most certainly none of us could make out a rhino in the vicinity. In the distance, in the stream, we could see something that looked like a partially submerged rock. Could that be the rhino? The elephant started forward again. As we got nearer, the rock in the water began to move. Oh, yes, it was a rhinoceros all right, and one slightly peeved for having been disturbed in his morning

ablutions. The ears twitched first of all. Then slowly the ponderous beast rose up out of the water, looking like a prehistoric animal, and stood pouring like a waterfall. The top of its body was grayish white and the part below the clearly marked water-line was blacker because of the wetness. For a few seconds it stood motionless watching us intently as if pondering what to do. Then slowly it turned and lumbered away along the stream bank pausing now and then to nibble at some succulent green grass growing on the water’s edge. The elephant followed in its wake, keeping the animal in sight. Finally the rhino gave a snort of annoyance, crossed the stream and disappeared into the undergrowth.



Rhino viewing from Elephant back



Rhino in the Hollong stream

Jaldapara: Evolution of a Rhino sanctuary

Such was my first encounter with the One-horned Indian Rhinoceros. We were in the Jaldapara wildlife sanctuary which lies at the foot of the Bhutan hills in West Bengal. Jaldapara is a small sanctuary as sanctuaries go — just over 115 km² of riverine forests shaped like an inverted V lying between the rivers Torsha and Malangi, bordering the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. But it is one of the three sanctuaries in India, outside of Assam, where the one-horned Indian Rhinoceros is to be found. (The other two are Gorumara National Park, also in West Bengal, and Dudhwa National Park in Uttar Pradesh.)

A few hundred years ago, the rhino ranged freely all over the grassy floodplains of the Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers. But

large-scale hunting and habitat destruction brought them to the verge of extinction by the turn of the twentieth century. And no wonder. In a period of thirty years, the Maharaja of Cooch Behar is said to have killed 207 of these animals in Jaldapara alone! Attempts to save the rhino and the fast vanishing forests of the terrai plains began in 1941 when Jaldapara was declared a game sanctuary. Later, in 1976, the Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary officially came into being. In ensuing years, the population of rhinos in Jaldapara seems to have stabilized thanks to stringent conservation efforts. According to the 2002 census, there are 80 rhinos in the sanctuary and this is over twice the number recorded in the census of 1994.

Where and How

To reach Jaldapara, the passenger who reaches Bagdogra airport must travel to Siliguri. The sanctuary is approximately 160 Km from Siliguri by road and the journey takes around four hours by bus, or taxi which can be hired here. At Madarihat, which is the entry-point to the sanctuary, there is a reasonably priced tourist lodge which affords comfortable accommodation. Or one can opt to stay in the middle of the forest at the Hollong Forest Bungalow, six kilometres from the gate of the sanctuary at Madarihat.

We opted to stay at Hollong forest bungalow, an old style colonial building set amidst idyllic surroundings. In front of this bungalow, the Hollong River flows gently along. The crystal clear water of this stream looks inviting and the soft murmur of flowing water soothes the mind. Across the river is a large meadow and it is not uncommon to see grazing chital, gaur and sometimes wild elephants and rhinos right here. Sometimes in the evening, towards sunset, noisy flocks of birds, mainly blossom-headed parakeets congregate on this meadow in their hundreds.



The rhino rising up



Hollong Forest Lodge



Rhino about to get out of the stream



Hollong meadow

Torrential rainfall

Jaldapara gets an average of 4200 mm of rain every year. That is a lot of rain by any standards, but the fact is not surprising when one remembers that Hashimara, which has replaced Chirapunji as the place with the world's heaviest rainfall, is only about 15 Km from here. Even in mid

summer one can expect rain here, and during the nights we spent there, in mid April, there was torrential rain. Still, by morning the weather had cleared, though it was still cloudy, and when we took our seats on our elephant, we were in an optimistic frame of mind. And events justified the optimism.

Elephant safari

The elephant ride starts early in the morning and lasts over an hour. As soon as one enters the forest, one is struck by the verdant lushness of the place

caused by the abundance of rainfall. The mixed deciduous forests and wet, alluvial grasslands interspersed with trees like Sissoo, Sal and Khayer constitute the ideal rhino

habitat. These animals feed on the short grasses of the meadows and the tender leaves of Sissoo and Khayer and shelter in the tall stands of elephant grass, often 20 feet high.

Besides, rhinos love to wallow and the many muddy pools and streams in this forest give abundant scope for this activity. Wallowing cools their huge bodies and also enables them to supplement their diet of grass and leaves with aquatic plants.

There are many trained elephants at Hollong which belong to the Forest Department. Each morning, three or four of them go out together taking visitors in search of rhinos. Each elephant can carry four adults on a kind of padded howdah secured to its back. Visitors must keep absolutely quiet and they must also watch out for swinging branches and thorny vines as the elephants make their way through dense thickets.



Family group on the Hollong grounds

The experienced mahouts first cover all the streams and the favourite rhino wallows, and usually a rhino is spotted within the first thirty minutes or so. Immediately two or three elephants converge on the area forming a kind of ring round the rhino, thus enabling the visitors to view the animal for a few minutes. As a rule, rhinos are placid creatures and do not seem to mind this as long as the spectators

remember to keep quiet and the elephants do not invade their private space. A mother rhino with a calf is, however, a different story. She will not tolerate any nonsense from anybody and she is liable to charge on sight without any other provocation. Mahouts and their elephants are careful to give such animals a wide berth.

The One-horned Indian Rhinoceros

Most visitors see wallowing rhinos; searching them out in the tall grass where they are sheltering is more difficult and more dangerous. Close up, the rhino looks like a prehistoric animal. Its thickly folded skin with the stud-like tubercles on it gives the impression that some kind of armor-plating has been rivetted on to its body. Many believed, and many people still believe, quite wrongly of course, that these animals are bullet-proof! The average rhino is around 1.5 m tall and weighs around 1800 kg, females being slightly smaller and lighter. The most

distinctive feature of this animal is its horn, a protuberance on its snout with an average length of 20 cm, made of densely matted hair. The Indian rhino has only one horn; its African cousin has two, one behind the other. This horn is a weapon of attack, but it is by no means the rhino's only means of showing aggression. For, strange as it may sound, an angry rhino bites! And one can imagine the consequences of being bitten by a rhinoceros. Suffice it to say that either way, it is not a pleasant prospect for any creature to get on the wrong side of an angry rhinoceros!

The challenges of Conservation

This unique feature of the rhino, its horn, is also the main source of the threat to its continued survival. Rhinos have been believed from ancient times to be the unicorn of mythology, a belief enshrined in their scientific name, *Rhinoceros unicornis*. Magical and medicinal properties have always been attributed to rhino horn which is supposed by quacks and credulous fools to cure a plethora of illnesses, real as well as imaginary. The price for rhino horn is astronomically high in the international market, particularly in Southeast Asian

countries, and this induces local poachers, egged on by underworld touts, to hunt this animal. Even in India at the time of writing this (in 1992), one kilogram of rhino horn fetches Rs.5.5 lakh. When one considers that the average rhino horn weighs 800 grams, one can understand the terrible temptation to which the impoverished local people are subjected and the disastrous consequences of such temptation for the rhino in India. Small wonder then, that recently the army had to be called out to combat organized rhino poachers in the Chitwan forests of Nepal.



Moving along the bank of the Hollong river



Local houses built on stilts testify to the ever-present possibility of floods



Rhino and horn, close-up



Rhino in the grassland

Other denizens of Jaldapara

At Jaldapara too, poaching is a constant head-ache for the authorities and only their vigilance keeps it under check.

According to the census figures of 1989, there were only 32 rhinos in this area. (As already seen the number has gone up to 80 by 2002).

The 1989 census showed that aside from the rhino, these forests held 52 gaur, 5 leopards and 7 tigers besides Sloth bears, Chital, Sambar, Wild boar, Hog deer, Barking deer etc. in significantly larger numbers. In addition, a herd of fifteen to twenty elephants can occasionally be encountered in this sanctuary. Most of these elephants are migrant visitors

from the Bhutan hills.

On many occasions during our elephant rides, the elephants flushed chital and sambar from thick cover. Once we caught a glimpse of a few hog deer scurrying for the protection of a thicket. Predators like the tiger and the leopard are mainly nocturnal and are, therefore, rarely encountered during day-time. Jaldapara is also abundant in the matter of its bird-life. The lucky visitor may see the endangered Bengal florican; but birds like the Red jungle fowl, the Great stone plover, and the Black-necked stork are more common and more likely to be seen.

Dream-time in in Jaldapara

Nightfall transforms Hollong Forest bungalow into a place of stealth and silence, of wonder and mystery, whispered, never spoken out aloud. It is now that the enchantment of the forest begins to work on the imaginative traveller. As the light begins to fade, the plaintive calls of Pea-fowl can be heard as they prepare to roost. Hollong meadow gradually loses its concreteness and before our eyes becomes a place of shadows. And what mysterious, moving shadows! Strange shapes seem to flit and move upon the Hollong meadow, their identities lost in the gathering dusk. What is that huge dark shape near that tree? Is it an elephant? Or a rhino? Or a gaur? The questions that leap to the mind are never answered, the mystery never ends. Now and then, a flash of lightning cleaves the darkness before us and, for a split second, seems to illuminate the whole world. Soon it begins to rain. And, eagerly anticipating what the next day's ride will bring, we let the drumming rain lull us into a quiet sleep.



Rhesus Macaque on a rock



MUDUMALAI TIGER RESERVE: JUNGLE DAYS AND NIGHTS

For Ajay Desai (1957-2020)

*"Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And auld lang syne!"*

I cannot think of Mudumalai without at the same time thinking of Ajay Desai. I first met him in 1983 in Mundanthurai wildlife sanctuary, Tamil Nadu, where

he and Mr. (later Dr.) Siva Ganesan were undergoing training in wildlife research under the redoubtable Dr. AJT Johnsingh. For the benefit of those who have not heard



Bear Bungalow



Aparna with Ajay, his children, and Field scientist Swaminathan who was another of her favourite people

which was reputed to be absolutely water-proof come snow or rain, was used by the three wildlife biologists as their sleeping quarters.

Then one fine morning the sky darkened and by noon it was raining hard. Indeed the rain was so heavy that the flowing rain water almost submerged the tent outside. When the trio of scientists returned earlier than usual, dripping to the skin, they found that the imported tent was not as water-proof as claimed: water had invaded every inch of space within and drenched everything inside. The members of the team did not have even a dry towel with which to dry themselves. Needless to say, we pitched in with whatever help we could render, and this broke the ice. This was the beginning of a long friendship.

Some years later, I met Ajay again when I visited BNHS, where he was a scientist at that time. He told me he was doing a project on elephants under BNHS, with the cooperation of

the Tamil Nadu Forest Department, and that he had set up a Field station at Kargudi inside Mudumalai wildlife sanctuary. He invited me to visit him and gave me his address to inform him if and when I found it convenient to drop by. I agreed to do so, and with that promise, we parted that day.

That day stands out for another reason too. I saw India's Bird-Man Salim Ali in the flesh for the first and only time, on a staircase there. I was going up, and he was coming down with a group of people. I think this happened a year

of Dr. Johnsingh, he is one of India's leading wildlife biologists. I remember Ajay had just finished his post-graduation in marine biology and was in the process of joining BNHS as a scientist. In the days we spent in Mundanthurai on that occasion, the boys under training would go out into the forest early in the morning, accompanied by Dr. Johnsingh, returning only by sundown. Dr. Johnsingh had recently returned from the Smithsonian in the US, and he had brought with him a cute but spacious tent which he had pitched on the ground adjacent to the FRH. This tent,



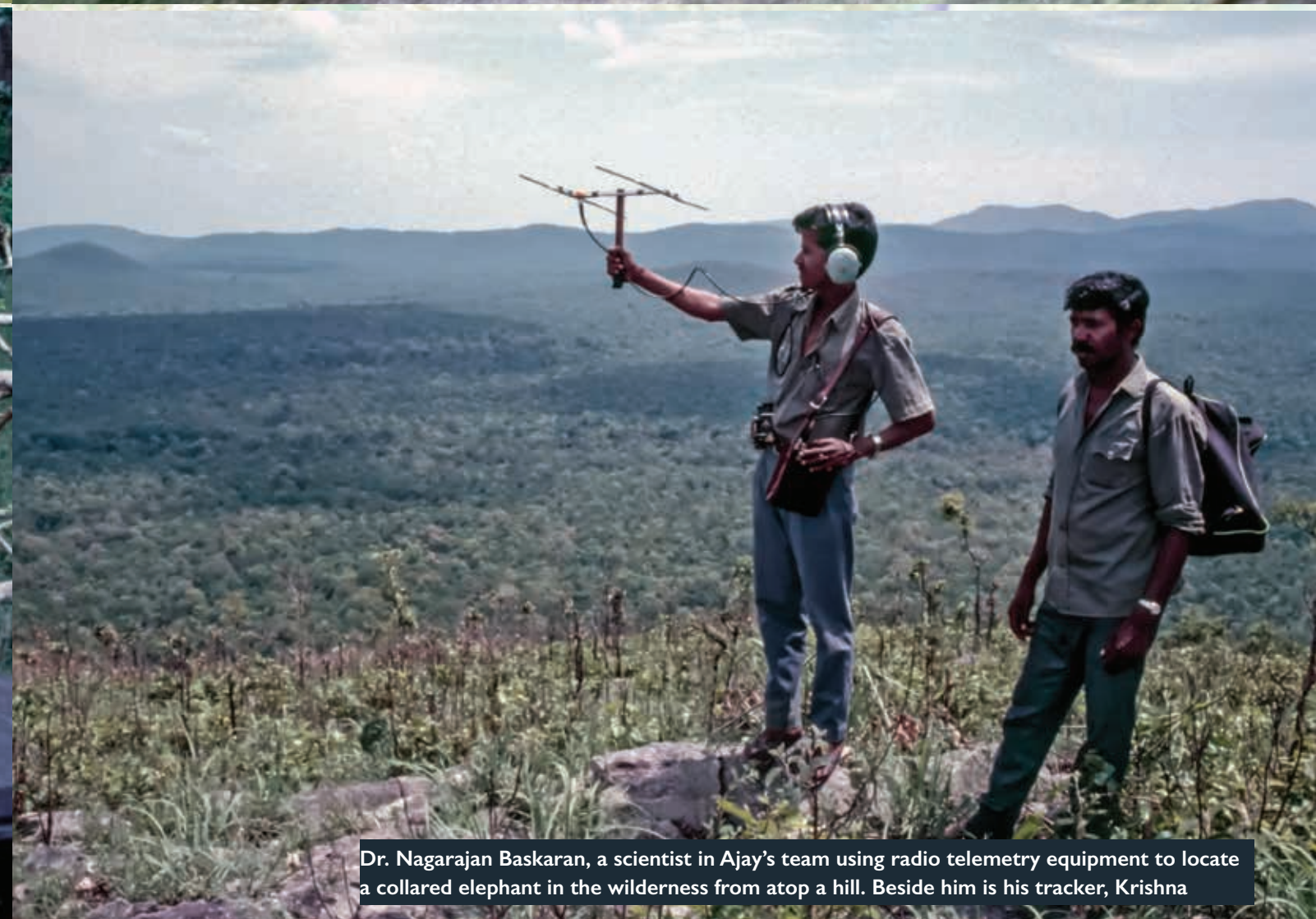
A Malabar Giant-squirrel



Sometimes an elephant herd may charge, though often it may be only a mock charge



A much younger Aparna watching an elephant herd in the forest, along with Dr. Nagarajan Baskaran, a senior member of Ajay's team



Dr. Nagarajan Baskaran, a scientist in Ajay's team using radio telemetry equipment to locate a collared elephant in the wilderness from atop a hill. Beside him is his tracker, Krishna

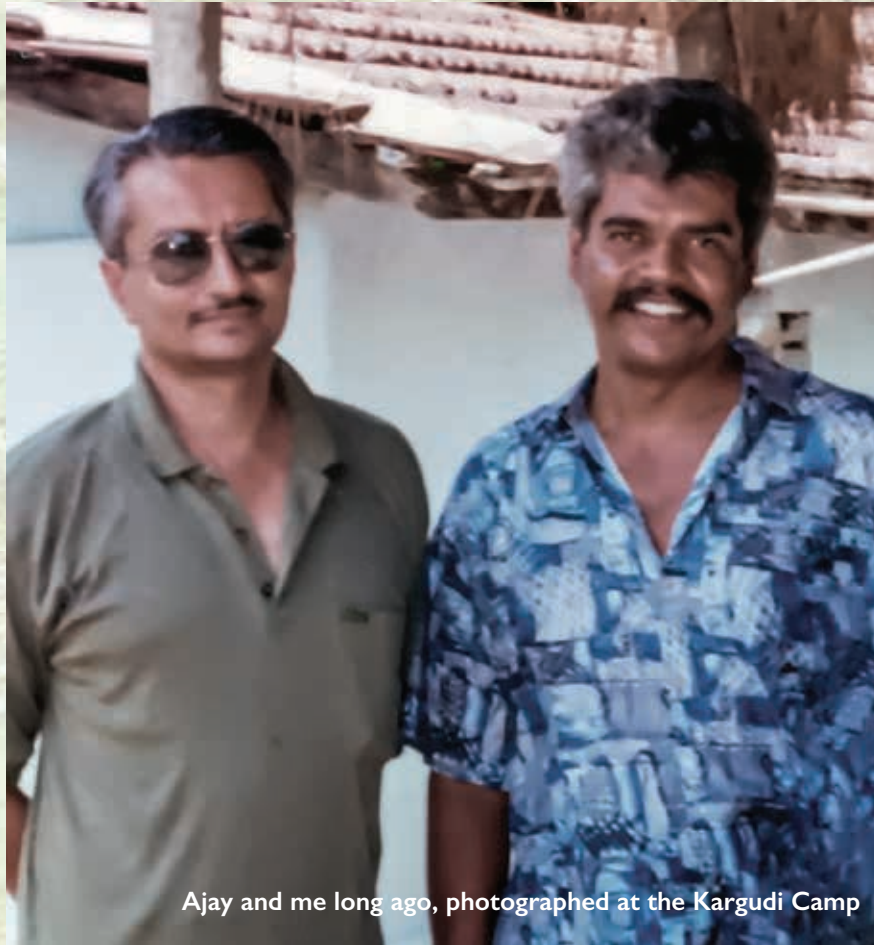
or two before he passed away.

Well, to cut a long story short, I kept my word to Ajay, not once but several times.

The first visit was in mid-summer, when my daughter Aparna was three or four years old, which would make it 1987 or '88. We had driven over from Trivandrum in our Maruti-800. The whole of Mudumalai appeared drought-stricken, and the forest looked liable to start burning at any moment. We found our way to the Kargudi Camp, where I met Krishna, the Kuruba tracker for the first time, hired by the BNHS team, who told us that Ajay was watching elephants in a nearby pool and promptly took us there. Ajay was happy to see us, particularly little Aparna, and we spent the best part of an hour in the Camp before continuing on our way. Our destination that day was my sister's home in Mysore. Before we left, Ajay made me promise him that we would come again soon for a longer stay at the Camp.

In ensuing years, we visited and stayed with him on several occasions in "Karadi Bungalow" (Bear Bungalow) in upper Kargudi. Ajay once wrote to me about how they came to choose this building as their Office:

"The Conservator of Forests Mr. Chitrapur who retired as PCCF and the Wildlife Warden Mr. Neelkantan had suggested that BNHS repair one of the three condemned buildings and use it as our office. We chose this one,



Ajay and me long ago, photographed at the Kargudi Camp

Bear Bungalow. It was the one in the most dilapidated state with doors and windows missing and lantana growing inside and obviously used by bears as a den, hence the name. Today, of the three, only this one stands thanks to the two officers who made this possible, and BNHS for repairing and maintaining it for two decades.... The only thing that disturbs me is that they now have an elephant-proof trench all around the settlement in Upper Kargudi. If people are regularly using buildings, elephants do no harm as we have seen during our extended stay there for over two decades..." (Please take a look at the picture of the the Bear Bungalow given at the beginning).

This picture represents a memory very dear to me and my family: a place where we have spent many delightful days and nights, thanks

to the hospitality of Ajay and his team. The cottage was in the middle of the forest, and sitting on the verandah, or on the steps at the back leading out from the kitchen, close to the squatting figure in the picture, you could often see a regular animal parade: elephants, wild dogs, spotted deer, the occasional sloth bear, and sometimes even the tiger, though we were never lucky enough to see the two last mentioned animals during the days we spent there. In the daytime, the trees around would be alive with birds, Malabar Giant squirrels, not to mention Langur. At night, the whole area would be pitch dark, lit only by innumerable fireflies. To little Aparna, this was a page out of a fairy-tale, and she unstintingly expressed her joy, much to the delight of the resident scientists. Indeed, all the members of the team were very fond of her, especially Ajay, and Aparna was very fond of her 'Ajay Uncle' too.

We stayed there on many occasions. My wife Shanthi used to bring bottles of pickles for the team, her contribution to the cause of wildlife research according to her, which was accepted most joyously by everyone present. As I recollect those times, I feel the compulsion to offer our heartfelt gratitude to the members of the Elephant Project team, who made us feel welcome there and generously shared their time and resources with us: Ajay Desai, Nagarajan Baskaran, Balasubramanian, Swaminathan, Krishna, Bomma, the late Chenna, who used to carry my little daughter around and who was tragically killed by a tiger, and many others.

The work done by this team of scientists over a period of two decades, based mainly on radio-telemetry study of elephant movement

and behaviour patterns, was exceptional too. It was probably the first study of its type conducted in India, and it has had enormous impact on elephant conservation in general and man-elephant conflict resolution in particular. Other than this study conducted by Ajay and his team of scientists, only one other similar study has been done, this time in Rajaji National Park by Mr. Christy Williams, and guided by Dr. Johnsingh. Ajay once wrote to me that the data generated by that study too was enormous, and that though it was published only in the BNHS Journal, it still remained unmatched for information pertinent to conservation and management of wildlife. He wrote that scientists were still trying to figure out the implications of those findings and to incorporate them into actual conservation and conflict management. "I use those lessons and data from those studies to support all my recommendations at state, national and international level," he wrote, and then went on, with a tinge of nostalgia, "That was a different world and one that is unlikely to ever be replicated as such field stations are no longer possible. But I guess we need to say thanks to all the people, Forest Department, BNHS, local tribals, the communities that lived around our field area, our friends and visitors, and the forests with all its animals for making it a truly unique world and experience."

Ajay was a cheerful and easygoing person, but strict and meticulous in his work. He was an ace photographer on top of being a field biologist and I was fascinated by the images he had captured in the wilderness. Till then, my photography had been limited to taking pictures of my daughter using cameras borrowed from friends, but seeing Ajay's





A Peacock in full plumage calling



A pack of Wild dogs in a forest clearing

work made me want to try my hand at it too. Ajay encouraged me, gave me my first clear idea about wildlife photography and what it entailed, and his mentorship, though he always denied that he was a mentor of any kind, was invaluable for me in later years as well.. We continued to receive his care and kindness over the years and I had thought that these would brighten my life to its end, since Ajay was junior to me in years. But that was not to be. Sometime in the early hours of November 20th, 2020, Ajay passed away in his sleep at his home in Belgaum. Needless to say,

his sudden, unexpected death was a terrible blow to his family as well as to all who were privileged to have known him. For me, it has been a chilling experience, sad beyond words. I suppose this is the inevitable and inescapable condition of old age, this unbearable sorrow of the death of friends. “The abbreviation of time and the failure of hope must always tinge with a browner shade the evening of life,” wrote the great 18th century British historian Edward Gibbon. I am in the process of finding out just how true that is.

With fond remembrance and love, I dedicate this chapter to the memory of Ajay Desai, Field Biologist, Friend, Mentor, Elephant Specialist.

A Day in A South Indian Jungle

It was just past 6 a.m. and all around us the forest lay shrouded in mist. The breeze was deliciously cool. Krishna, my *kuruba* friend of many years sniffed the air, delicately, like breathing in the fragrance of a flower. In the distance a peacock made its desolate call — — — *miaaow... miaaow...* followed closely by the rutting call of spotted deer. A few minutes of silence, and then, somewhere nearby, a jungle fowl and a spur fowl started calling, as if they were performing a duet. I stood there silently, enjoying the breeze, enjoying the stillness punctuated only by the bird and animal calls, telling myself that I could stay here like this for ever and never tire of it. Soon, I knew, the chorus of bird and animal calls will rise in frequency and tempo; soon the sun will rise and the jungle will wake once again to the glory of a dawn among the hills.

We started our trek with Krishna taking the lead.

We were in the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, in the state of Tamil Nadu in Southern India. Literally, the name Mudumalai means ‘Ancient Hills’, and this is a good description of the place. This sanctuary, an area of around 320² Kilometres, in an extensive belt of forests, is located on a plateau at an altitude of 1000 metres from sea-level, at the base of the Nilgiri hills. It contains lush valleys, open grasslands, undulating meadows, swamps and hills, inhabited by a rich variety of wildlife. This day my aim was to locate and if possible to photograph elephants, and also a pack of the Indian Wild Dog, locally known as ‘Chennai’ or ‘Dhole’ which was known to be operating in this area. I was indeed lucky in having



A Sloth bear



Krishna, then



Krishna, now

managed to get Krishna to come with me as guide. Krishna belongs to the *Kuruba* tribe, and was the official tracker of the biologists engaged in the 'Elephant Project', a field study of elephants and elephant habitat undertaken by the Bombay Natural History Society. He knew these forests like the back of his hand, and had an instinctive understanding of wild animals and their ways.

A walk in an Indian jungle is a thrilling experience. Indeed, each step one takes is a new experience in itself, perhaps even a dream realized. Sights and sounds, and, yes, smells, clamour for your exclusive attention. If you wear dull coloured clothes, and if you tread softly and do not hurry, and breathe deeply and make no noise, the jungle will reveal her secrets to you. It is as if a whole new world of sensation and delight is waiting to be born with each step, or hiding just round the corner ready to be experienced. But woe to the man who gets lost in his own world of sensual impressions, and walks, as it were, in his sleep. For that can have fatal consequences. A nightmare is a dream too, though a dream that has gone bad. One has to be alert every second, concentrate on every step, keep all one's senses tuned to receive signals which may portend danger—for, what

lurks behind that rock by the track one cannot predict. It may be a fragile wild flower, or an exquisitely coloured spider, a chameleon still as the stone on which it sits, or equally probably an irate elephant!

Krishna stopped to sniff the air once again. Born and bred in these forests his senses had been honed so sharp that they had become potent tools of survival. Krishna turned to me and said softly, '*Anai*', Elephant. He could smell elephants. I sniffed too; and faintly, along with the smell of crushed grass, I thought I could discern the smell of elephant dung. Then, careful to keep the wind blowing towards us, we slowly moved in the direction in which Krishna supposed the elephants to be.

Soon we came upon the herd, about fifteen elephants feeding among the trees. The mist had not yet lifted, and the huge creatures looming out of the curtain of mist had a strange and awe-inspiring beauty. We crept as close as we dared and observed them from behind the trunk of a tree. Elephants have poor eyesight though their sense of smell is very keen; and so long as you keep reasonably quiet and stay downwind of them, you can escape detection.

Elephant on a misty morning

This is without doubt one of my first wild elephant pictures [perhaps the very first of them] taken on foot in the forests of Mudumalai. I owe this picture to my friend Ajay Desai who sent me along with his tracker Krishna in search of elephants.

There was a herd in the vicinity, to which this young tusker belonged, and he was feeding on his own. The rest of the herd was scattered among the trees on the right. The breeze for the moment was blowing towards us. I moved carefully and silently, making



Elephant on a misty morning



A Monitor lizard on a rock



Two young tuskers at the water's edge, the one behind is trying to push aside the one in front



A vigilant Langur on the watch



A Spotted deer stag, antlers in velvet



Spotted deer fighting during the rut



A Wild dog surveys his surroundings, and especially me from his seat on a rock



Leopard



A more recent Wild dog image taken with a digital camera

use of the cover of tree trunks, in a bid to get as close as possible to the elephant before the wind changed direction. Finally I got this, and one or two more pictures on my Pentax K-1000 camera on which was mounted my 80-200 mm telephoto, the longest tele-lens I possessed in those days. Then the breeze changed, the tusker lifted his trunk in our direction and we beat a hasty retreat. It is by no means a great picture. But to me, it looks “atmospheric”, especially with the enhancement of memory.

We were so near the animals that we could actually hear their abdominal rumblings, which sounded like distant thunder. The mist was slowly lifting and we could feel the wind direction change. We saw a young elephant lift a curled trunk and scent the air in our direction. Krishna signaled that it was time to move. Careful not to disturb the feeding herd, and careful not to blunder into a straggler moving up to join his companions we once again started on our way.

We walked steadily for about two hours, stopping only to identify birds on the wing, and to photograph some of the many kinds of colourful spiders found in these parts. Once a monitor lizard sunning itself on a rock slithered away when we approached too close. The day was slowly becoming warm but not uncomfortably so since the sky was cloudy most of the time. “Later there will be rain,” Krishna said. I was thankful for the plastic wrappers I had taken along for the camera equipment. A storm in these hills, in this season, may not last long, but while it lasts it will be a torrent.

Hectic activity overhead alerted us to the presence of a troupe of Common Langurs

foraging in the wind-blown branches of the huge trees around us. ‘Whooh—Whooh—Whooh—Whooh—’ came the distinctive call of the langur sentinel, seated on the topmost branch of a tall tree, who looks out all the time for signs of danger, and whose alarm call alerts the jungle to the presence of a prowling panther, or tiger, or human being.

These langurs are primarily leaf eaters. They are wasteful feeders and keep dropping leaves and tender shoots and sometimes bunches of berries, and often herds of spotted deer can be seen nearby waiting to exploit the accidental generosity of the langurs. Here too there was a herd of about fifteen, in the meadow near the track to which they had retreated at our approach. Their leader was a stag with a fine head of antlers all ready for the rutting season which had just begun. As a rule spotted deer are tolerant of human presence, but this herd seemed unusually wary, and as soon as we made a move in their direction, they retreated and vanished silently into the thicket. One never ceases to be amazed at the absolute silence with which the denizens of the forest, deer and Sambar and Gaur and even Elephants move about, appear and disappear, almost as if by magic.

“Later it will rain,” Krishna had told me hours ago, and now this prophesy is fulfilled. The rain caught us on the crest of a small hillock just as we were about to begin our descent. It started with a wet driving wind and a sky that had turned coal black. We had just enough time to secure the equipment in plastic wrappers before the lashing storm hit us. Within moments visibility dropped to a few feet and now we are drenched to the skin. There is no cover of any sort on this hill, and



A ‘group photo stop’ on the way, during a safari drive



On the grounds of Abhayaranyam FRH. Standing left to right Abdul Nassar, Prof Unnikrishnan, a close friend from Trivandrum who came with me on this trip, and seated: Manikantan, myself, and Suresh.



Moyar Gorge

there is nothing for us to do except wait it out. Terrific flashes of lightning and deafening thunder follow one after another. I sit leaning against a rock, making the most of the meager shelter it affords, and wait patiently. The storm seems to me a thing alive, and its fierce clamour seems to mingle with every breath I take. I feel exhilarated and at peace with all the world. I whisper to myself the words of a Buddhist monk, written perhaps a thousand years ago, but surely in just such a situation:

When the clouds beat their drums and all the ways of the birds are thick with rain, the monk sits quietly on top of a hill, waiting, beyond good and evil, waiting for nothing, and knows no ecstasy greater than this

It was 2 p.m. when the rain stopped, and by then it was time to start our return trek. We had failed to see the wild dogs we had come to photograph. But we knew they were



The watch-tower



Keeping a sharp lookout



Elephants drinking in the river



Another tusker trying to catch our scent

here somewhere. Wild dog scat is distinctive; it is dropped in the middle of the track and contains the undigested hair of their prey. These we had seen in plenty, which showed that the pack was active in the vicinity. Krishna was confident that we would see them on our way back, or at any rate in the

evening. I was not optimistic; and when in a short while we came across the fresh pug marks of a leopard on the wet sand by a stream, I felt sure that the pack had moved off to some other area, for it is rare to see both species of predators operating in the same place.

Tusker trying to catch our scent

Wildlife Photographers generally exhibit their best images, be it in galleries or on social media.. By “best” I mean those that are sharp, well-lit and properly exposed, pleasingly composed and usually depicting the subject in its natural habitat, and engaged in a natural and habitual action or activity. These ‘best’ images are those that their viewers are likely to consider good. But to the photographer herself or himself the truly ‘best’ images are those that may carry with them a voluptuous whiff of the original experience which each image represents. Posted below is just such an image of mine which I recently re-discovered while rummaging among the photographs in my collection.

It was taken over thirty years ago in Mudumalai. Early one morning I had set out on a walk into the forest along with my friend Krishna after having obtained permission for doing so the previous evening. Within a few minutes, we came face to face with this tusker. We were uncomfortably close to him and when he lifted his trunk towards us to catch our scent, which all the perfumes of Arabia would not have sweetened for him, it was already time to beat a hasty retreat. I just about managed

to click this one shot. The light was poor, and I guess my hands were trembling a bit, and when the processed film came back, the frame was quite blurred and grainy. But in those pre-digital days, we were all much less uptight about blurred and grainy images than we have since become. Today when I look at it I can feel once again that early morning which came and went long ago, and will not come again, the fresh breeze, the slight chill in the air, the back-lit tusker in front of us lifting his enormous trunk in our direction, and the frightened beating of my own heart. Krishna told me later that this particular tusker was somewhat bad tempered and unpredictable. Thankfully we did not stand around to find out just how much.

As it turned out, Krishna was right. That evening, in Camp, Ajay received information that there was a pack of wild dogs near the Peacock Dormitory in Kargudi, quite close to where we were. Ajay made haste, with me tagging along, and we reached the spot but by then the pack had scattered and all but disappeared. Ajay then ran some distance up the path, with me in tow. We got into the jeep that was parked there, and Ajay drove very fast to a part of the forest where he predicted



A family group photo with Theo inside Theppacaud FRH ground



Theo, Shanthi and Aparna, by the Moyar

the pack would re-assemble. And sure enough, a few minutes after we had reached that point, the wild dogs started appearing one by one. Since we were sitting quietly inside the jeep, they stared at us for some time and then ignoring us, settled down, as if for an afternoon siesta. The sun had come out now and one magnificent animal was sitting up, very much like a dog, and basking in the sun's rays. His rusty brown coat seemed to catch fire in the sun. "Ok, here they are, now photograph them to your heart's content," whispered Ajay. And I did. The photograph given below is special for me, because it is the first wild dog picture I got, and that too with my Pentax camera, newly brought from the US. The image was made possible only because of the kindness and enthusiasm of Ajay, who tracked down the pack, did some fast work with the jeep and waited patiently while I got my images. Since then, thanks to the acquisition of a slightly greater level of skill, and equipment of much better quality, I have managed to get pictures of wild dogs which are perhaps better, technically speaking, than this one. But this will always remain special to me.

*The Asiatic Wild Dog **Cuon alpinus**, though not a true dog fewer number of molars, greater number of teats is one of the most efficient and relentless predators to be found in our forests. In Malayalam and Tamil, Wild Dogs are called "Chennai" (chenna + naai), meaning Red dog because of their reddish appearance. Once considered 'vermin', these animals used to be indiscriminately hunted. In fact, hunters' stories tell us that right up to the middle of the twentieth century, the government used to pay a certain sum of money for each Wild Dog carcass or pelt produced by any hunter. Today, the IUCN status of the Asiatic Wild Dog is "Endangered", the result of habitat loss, prey base depletion and diseases transmitted from domestic animals.*

In this pack there were eight wild dogs. They posed for my camera, and not one even growled. There is no record of these animals ever attacking human beings. Finally, irritated perhaps by the sound of the shutter, they slowly got up, one by one, and moved away into the forest. Our mission for the day



White-backed Vultures. A rare sight in recent years

completed, we drove back to the Camp.

Later, at night, it rained again, briefly. After it had stopped, I took a walk along the path winding behind the rest house where I was staying. I had a powerful torch; it was elephant country and one had to be very cautious. The wind was wet and cool and invigorating. Overhead, a bird of prey, probably a horned owl, flitted by in ominous silence. I shone my

torch into the forest on my right. A marvellous sight greeted my eyes. A large herd of spotted deer had congregated on the meadow for the night, and in the powerful beam their bobbing eyes burned like fire. It was a sight to dream of, indescribably beautiful. A cool wind was blowing, and it brought with it some drops of rain. So without further ado, I made my way back to my room.

With Friends at Mudumalai

When I got transferred to Palakkad in 1991, the frequency of our visits to Mudumalai increased manyfold.

It was an easy trip to make: pile ourselves and our necessities into the Maruti-800, and start driving on a Friday morning, have lunch at Ooty, reach Mudumalai by evening, stay for two nights and return on Sunday. As mentioned earlier, my sister was living in Mysore, and since Mudumalai was on the route to Mysore, sometimes we would spend a day or two there, either on the way to her home or on the return journey. Usually it was a family trip. But on many occasions, I was accompanied by some friends of many years, delightful people indeed whom I first met when they were my students in college, and who in later years, and up to the time of writing this have kept the contact alive.

We had many wonderful experiences during such trips. We would be staying in one of the available dormitories in Mudumalai, or more rarely in rooms in one Forest Rest House or the other, all of which were operated by the Tamil Nadu Forest Department. The charges were very reasonable, the facilities adequate, and the food was usually simple but excellently

prepared. In this regard, it is impossible to neglect mentioning Ismail-ikka, who was in charge of Abhayaranyam FRH, the taste of whose dishes still lingers on.

It was on one such trip that we spent half a day in one of the watch-towers in the forest and were vouchsafed the grand spectacle of elephants drinking in the Moyar river, and bathing and frolicking in its waters.

An elephant with whom we had become familiar on many such journeys along that route was the “Koottukomban” or Crossed Tusker so called for obvious reasons. We used to meet him frequently, feeding peaceably in the forest on the sides of the Mudumalai/ Bandipur road. He never showed any signs of aggression or violence, even when foolish wayfarers would stop their car, get out and try to approach him. Then on one trip to Mysore we did not see him, nor did we see him on our way back.. He seemed to have disappeared, and we never saw him again. Later we learnt, much to our sorrow, and particularly my daughter’s great sorrow whose favourite he was, that he had been poached. His tusks were recovered in a raid somewhere near Sabarimala, and the





elephant researchers in Mudumalai identified them as belonging to this elephant.

In those days, the whole Mudumalai/Bandipur area was teeming with wildlife of every kind: elephant, gaur, deer, wild pig, monkeys, leopard, sloth bear and many species of birds. Every outing brought new sightings of all these animals, and every stay therefore was an exhilarating experience.

Another friend who accompanied us on one trip to Mudumalai was Theo Haagsma, a Dutch engineer who was at that time working with the Kerala Government on a drinking water project being implemented using Dutch aid. Theo had a good time in Mudumalai. He met the scientists in the Kargudi Camp. On our return to our FRH at Theppacaud, by about 8:30 pm, we saw on the way two leopards, much to his delight.





A TREK TO MUKURTHI PEAK

A few kilometers from here”, Rangasamy said, “sitting silently on the side of a hill, I once saw, not one, not two, not three, but four tigers gamboling on the grass a few metres below me.” We were a small group of four people, walking leisurely along a forest track. Rangasamy was a quiet, friendly man, self-effacing to a fault and extraordinarily gracious and helpful, and none of us would suspect him of pitching a tall tale. Still, in a land where sighting a single

tiger is in itself quite remarkable, seeing four tigers together is the stuff of fantasy. Besides, we knew that tigers, unlike lions, are not gregarious animals at all. “Probably a mother with three sub-adult cubs, giving the impression of four adult animals”, said Kunhikrishnan, friend and wildlife expert whose researches had taken him to most parts of the South Indian wilderness. That sounded plausible and we all agreed with that theory. I could not help noticing that after this



The fishing hut



Feral buffaloes in the distance

exchange we began to walk more briskly and more warily. Talk of tigers in a forest always has such an effect on people.

We had reached the famous hill station of Ooty (or Udagamandalam to give it its full name) the previous evening, with the intention of trekking through the Mukurthi wildlife sanctuary and eventually climbing the Mukurthi peak (2,556 metres). It was late December, a day shy of Christmas Eve, and it was very cold in Ooty, particularly at night. We knew that it would be colder where we were going. We were met by our friend and guide Rangasamy, an active member of the Nilgiri Wildlife and Environment Association (NWEA), who had promised to accompany us in our trek to the Mukurthi peak. This peak has a curious shape; it looks like an acute angled triangle with one side almost vertical. A little imagination would make it resemble a human nose, which is how it got its name: “*mooku*” in Tamil and Malayalam means “nose”.

We spent the evening procuring provisions for our journey and stay. There is a small “Fishing hut” operated by the NWEA a few kilometers away from the base of the peak, and that is where we intended to spend the next couple of days. This cozy hut has two rooms with beds, toilet, and running water. The spacious front room has a fire-place too, a very welcome feature in this sort of climate. Close by, there is a rather large lake, the Mukurthi lake, around 6 km across, made by a dam on the Pykara River, and it is an area of great scenic beauty. This place is one of the entry points of the Mukurthi Wildlife Sanctuary, a small forest tract of some 110 km² situated on the Nilgiri plateau. Here, the last surviving mountain goats of the Nilgiris, the Nilgiri Tahr, lead a precarious existence.

Only around a hundred or hundred and fifty of these animals are believed to remain in this area and even this small number is daily diminished by predation from poachers, leopards, and less frequently from tigers.

From Ooty, we drove along a very badly maintained road towards Porthimund, where there is a Tamil Nadu Electricity Board station. Here we were joined by Kuttan, a *Toda* tribal who is the care-taker of the hut. *Todas* are the original inhabitants endemic to this region, and today they too are on the verge of extinction with only around 1500 of them left. These pastoral herders apparently believe that the Goddess *Teikirshy* first made the buffalo, (the horned, grey, wooly buffalo to be exact), and *then* She made the *Todas* so that the buffalos may be properly looked after. Needless to say, these buffalos are considered sacred animals. At Porthimund, we left our car, for the motorable road ends here, and started our walk towards the Fishing Hut, around 6 km away.

The Mukurthi sanctuary contains the few relatively untouched shola-grassland areas left in the Nilgiris. Elsewhere this habitat has been almost entirely wiped out by plantations, mostly of Pine, Black wattle, and Eucalyptus. The path leading from Porthimund to the Fishing Hut is through a degraded stretch, though there were healthy forest patches here and there. Seeing them, I could only imagine how pristinely beautiful this area must have been once upon a time. Sometimes in the distance we spotted huge buffalos with large, curved horns. “They are feral animals”, said Rangasamy, “let loose by *Todas* into the forest as part of some of their rituals. And they are dangerous. They have lost their fear of man, and they are extremely irritable and known to charge without provocation”. And



The Nilgiri Salea



Wild flowers seen on the way

sure enough, on a couple of occasions, these animals pawed the earth at us and snorted; but they were quite far away. Had they been closer, surely it would have been tree-climbing time for us!

The Sanctuary also has most of the larger mammals, like Tiger, Leopard, Wild dog, an occasional Sloth bear, and itinerant herds of Elephants, not to mention arboreal animals like the Nilgiri langur, and the Malabar Giant squirrel. And on the upper reaches, in the rocky out-hangs and grassy plains, as mentioned earlier, live the Nilgiri Tahr. But these larger mammals are seldom encountered on a casual stroll like this, though if you keep your eyes and ears open you will see a variety of birds.

The leisurely walk took us to the Hut in under a couple of hours. A mug of hot tea refreshed us. The hut was a small, idyllic two-room affair with a small fencing around it, and a few minutes away was the Mukurthi lake. We spent some time on the lake-shore, and explored the immediate vicinity of the hut. By then dusk was falling, the chill in the air was increasing, and we returned to the coziness of the hut with its blazing hearth. And it did get quite cold with night-fall. Then it was a great pleasure to sit close to the fire and exchange stories with Rangasamy, and even the simple meal served by Kuttan tasted delicious. Next morning, we planned to set out well before day-break in order to be atop the Mukurthi peak at first light.

Well, things didn't work out exactly to plan. To start with, we over-slept. What with one thing or the other, it was quite 7 a.m. when we started out. The mist was rising from the forest floor and though it wasn't bright daylight yet, the sun was up alright by the

time we had walked a kilometer towards our destination. The route began as a gentle climb, but the morning chill kept fatigue at bay. Besides there were many things on the way which captivated for our attention, wild flowers for instance, and panoramic views of the blue waters of the Mukurthi lake lying far below us shimmering in the breeze, various types of small birds, and once the *Nilgiri Salea* (*Salea horsfieldii*), a little lizard endemic to this area. Then the climb began to get tougher. There were patches of loose gravel and we knew that these slippery bits would pose a real problem on the way down. In about three hours of steady climbing, we had reached the summit of the peak.

A magnificent sight greeted our eyes. In front of us, and hundreds of metres below us, the pristine forests of New Amarambalam lay shrouded in mist and cloud. Around us, as far as the eye could see, grass-clad hills stretched out like billowing waves on a brown sea. The whole thing was breathtakingly beautiful and we stood there, swaying in the strong wind, having forgotten our fatigue, forgotten even to slake our thirst in the presence of this grand spectacle.

We spent a few hours on the hill-top, resting, rejoicing, and eating our packed lunch of chappatis and *subji*, washed down with plenty of crystal-clear water collected from a spring on the way. And then it was time to start our return. We had planned to take another and a more circuitous route back to the hut, and we wanted to get back before dark, hence the hurry. The way down, predictably, was more difficult than the way up, and the gravelly patches did give us some trouble. The sun sets early here because of the presence of all those hills and ridges. Once I turned round and looked up while going down the path ---



Sunset



Rhododendron flower

a dangerous thing to do when you are going down a hill --- and was rewarded with the breath-taking sight of the sun setting behind a hill ridge. The last rays lay like a halo round the rim of the ridge lighting up the grass at the top so that it sparkled and glowed and burnt against the back-drop of a deep blue sky, with an ethereal splendour that was incredible to behold. I had just enough time to snap off a couple of photographs before the spectacular scene dissolved into nothing.

Night in the Fishing Hut is always a time for

quietness and reflection. Some tea, a quick bath in heated water, the warmth of the hearth and a simple meal erased the fatigue of the long day's activities. Later it grew increasingly chilly. We meant to climb the peak once more the next morning, and so we retired to bed early. All night long, or so it seemed, the surrounding forests reverberated with the lonesome call of jackal packs, as I lay awake, too contented to sleep. Then the fire died down, the cold started to penetrate my sweater, and pulling a thick blanket over the sleeping-bag, I closed my eyes.

Two days in Upper Bhavani (Mukurthi)

And thereby hangs a tale!
We were living in Kannur at that time and on the way back home from my sister's home in Mysore, we had driven via Ooty with the intention of reaching Kundah, a place some thirty kilometres away from Ooty township. The idea was to spend a day or two with an old pupil of mine, who had been inviting me over for some time, tempting me with tales of wildlife in and around the area where he and his parents were living then. The area belonged to the Kundah hydel project, of the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board in which his father was an Overseer. I had sent several telegrams to my student informing him of our proposed visit, but hadn't received any reply from him. There was no other way of communication in those pre-mobile-phone days.

When we reached the Kundah camp it was

evening and it transpired that my pupil had been sent away on some errand, but he had received the telegrams and announced the possibility of our arrival to his family. We were warmly received and the father assured me that my pupil would return soon. Meanwhile, it was getting very dark and the gentleman kindly led us to the adjacent house where he had arranged for our stay. The people of that house were away on leave and the house was his to do with as he pleased. Thus comfortably installed, we rested for a while, waiting for my pupil's return. I then got the idea of taking a bath and went to examine the bathroom. It was a tidy place and a huge metal cauldron was already full with steaming water for our use. It was getting increasingly cold and I decided to have a bath at the earliest. I closed the door and started to strip. There were metal hooks conveniently placed on the wall though they were directly



New Amarambalam forests



Me at the entrance to the shack

over the vessel with the hot water. I was about to hang my shirt on the hook when there was loud knocking from the back door close to the bathroom and cries of “Sir! Sir!” My pupil had finally arrived.

Putting my shirt back on, I went out to meet him. We were staying in a compact, but very neat “Line house”, with just one sitting room, one bedroom, a kitchen-cum-dining and the bathroom. When I opened the back door from where the knocking came, my pupil and his father rushed in, my pupil with a loud “Sir!” But it was not his joy on seeing me that was written on his face. Urgently he pushed me into the bathroom. Then he pointed at the hooks on which I had intended to hang my clothes. “Those metal hooks are live”, he panted out. “What do you mean live?” I asked, puzzled. “Sir, those metal hooks are live, with electricity. They are the hooks from which we hang the home-made heater for heating the water. In this camp there are no plug points or anything of the sort. There are only live points from which we can take whatever electric current we need to operate various gadgets. My mother’s cousin who came a few months ago and touched one such point got thrown clean across the room”.

To think that I was just about to hang my shirt on those hooks! The chill in the air was nothing compared to the chill in my heart. I gave up all ideas of a bath. And indeed, that night, I decided not to get out of bed under any circumstances. Let the bladder take care of itself in the cold, winter night. To stir out of bed was to challenge death by electrocution. Better to pee in bed than to be changed into a corpse.

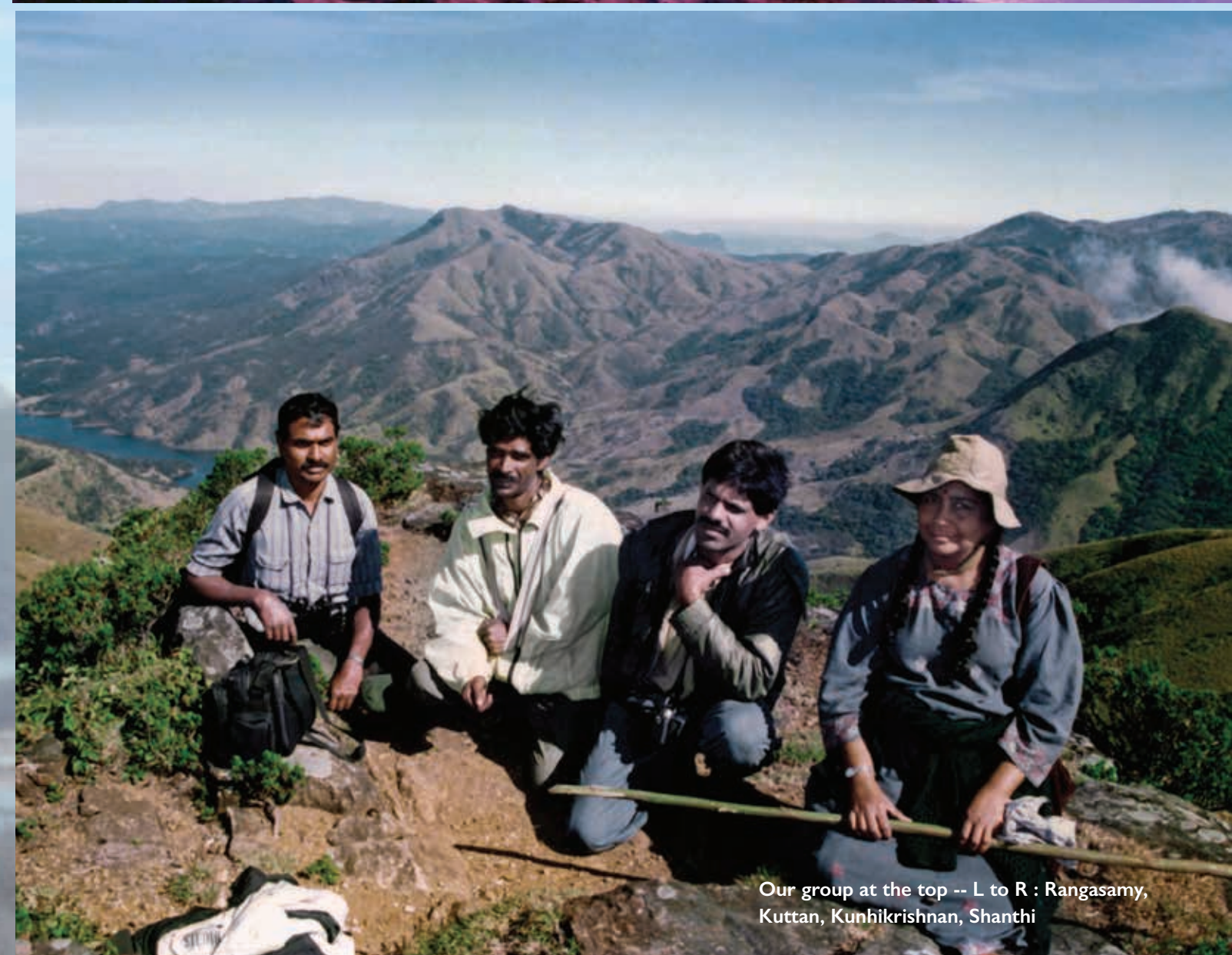
Next morning we woke up and moved about the house in fear and trembling lest we should

touch any dangerous surface by accident. Nothing bad happened. By then my pupil came in and cheerfully invited us to have breakfast next door at his house. We complied and soon sat relieved and comfortable in their living room while his mother prepared our breakfast in the adjacent kitchen. It was quite cold, but this room was heated and warm. I saw that the room heater was an open, rectangular box made of cheap soft-wood, across which strands of copper wire had been fixed in a criss-cross pattern. The contraption was attached to two hooks on the wall by means of an insulated wire. The copper strands were glowing red. This heater was placed in a corner of the room and the radiation of heat pleasantly filled the whole room. But there was something which stopped me from being pleasantly at ease. My pupil’s sister’s baby, less than a year old, was crawling all over the floor. The baby would go close to the glowing box and my heart would skip a beat. “Look, look, the baby!” I would say to my host. “That’s ok, no problem”, was his reply each time. “She is getting too close!” I would say in a choked whisper. “That’s Ok, sir”, was his reply, “She will be ok, she has been given.” I found that phrase cryptic to say the least. “Given what?” I asked. “Sir, when she started crawling we gave her a dose. We let her touch the heater. She got a jolt and was thrown some distance. We let her crawl around again. She touched again, and got a jolt, again. Now she doesn’t touch it,” he concluded with a smile. I sat in stony silence, not knowing what to say. The father spoke again, and to put me at my ease, pointing to my equally joyful pupil, he said, “He too was given a dose, when he was a baby.”

At this point, there was a suppressed scream and a loud thud from the kitchen. My pupil



hanthi fishing in the Upper Bhavani lake, as it lay bathed in a strange light, close to sunset



Our group at the top -- L to R : Rangasamy, Kuttan, Kunhikrishnan, Shanthi

quickly got up and went to investigate. He was back in a minute, with a smiling face. “Amma”, he said. “She got a jolt while making dosa. Something must have touched something. She hit the wall. Now she is simply resting.”

An hour later, a jeep we had hired came to take us to Upper Bhavani. We had obtained the permission of the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board, since we were moving around in areas which fell under their jurisdiction. The drive was slow and winding and after stopping for lunch in the Upper Bhavani Guest House, and a brief period of rest, we started on our way again into deeper areas in the wilderness. There was no human presence or signs of human activity anywhere, and once we saw a beautiful jackal which, on seeing us, disappeared into the bush. Finally, by about

5 pm, we reached the place where we were going to spend the night, an old shack that belonged to the Electricity board where they had permitted us to stay during our sojourn there.

The shack turned out to be just that, a shack with walls and roof of tin sheet, in a state of very poor maintenance. It had outlived its usefulness years ago and had been totally abandoned. Part of the wall, and the roof had fallen off. There was no door, but we could use a tin sheet, dislodged long ago from the roof, to lean against the entrance thereby partly blocking the elements: it was winter and the nights were going to be terribly cold. Before the sun set, we all got busy gathering fuel for the fire which was to keep us warm at night. Fortunately there were bits and pieces of fire-wood lying all around in the vicinity,

and it wasn't difficult to make a gathering of combustible material which would last us through the night. Just a few meters from the shack was the large Upper Bhavani lake. During the British days, officers had used these waters for their recreational fishing and had stocked them with many species of fish, including the Rainbow Trout, which were still to be found in many freshwater lakes and streams in the area. Our group had come prepared for fishing and we did manage to catch two or three fish which we ate for supper.

We went to bed early since the night was very cold and there was no artificial light anywhere: it was pitch dark. We were in a forest and the presence of wild animals could not be ruled out. We started a substantial bonfire just outside the shack before retiring for the night. No wild animals came calling in the night. But the cold did, and how! Wrapped

up in our sleeping bags, with the fire blazing outside, we started out cozy and warm. But the minute the flames died down a bit, it was a different story! Someone or the other had to creep out into the bitter cold and stoke the fire till it blazed again. Thankfully, the firewood collected in the evening sufficed and lasted the whole night. But the frequent waking up to keep the fire alive was not conducive to a good night's sleep.

Next morning, we went around exploring the surroundings for a while. But sleep deprivation and hunger had made us a chastened group. There wasn't much to explore either because we weren't permitted to go into areas which were beyond the TNEB's purview, which required permission from the Forest Department. So there was nothing to do but pile our things and ourselves into the jeep and return to Kundah so as to reach there in time for lunch.





The Vivekananda Rock memorial in the old days before the Thiruvalluvar statue was erected

KANYAKUMARI: AT LAND'S END

“Forty years ago, I came here as a young boy and here I have stayed ever since,” said Krishna Pillai, who seemed pleased by the attention he was getting from us. “This was one of the few lodging houses here in those days,” he continued. “The air then was pure, water plentiful, and very few people came here except during the temple festival. In 40 years things have changed...” He paused to spit a mouthful of betel expertly into a spittoon two metres away as if to indicate his opinion on the nature of the change. “Water is now

scarce, ramshackle lodging houses have sprouted all over, the cost of living has shot up, corruption and crime are on the rise, and the very air we breathe stinks...” He finished speaking and sat, jaws moving but otherwise immobile, looking out into the darkness and the sea.

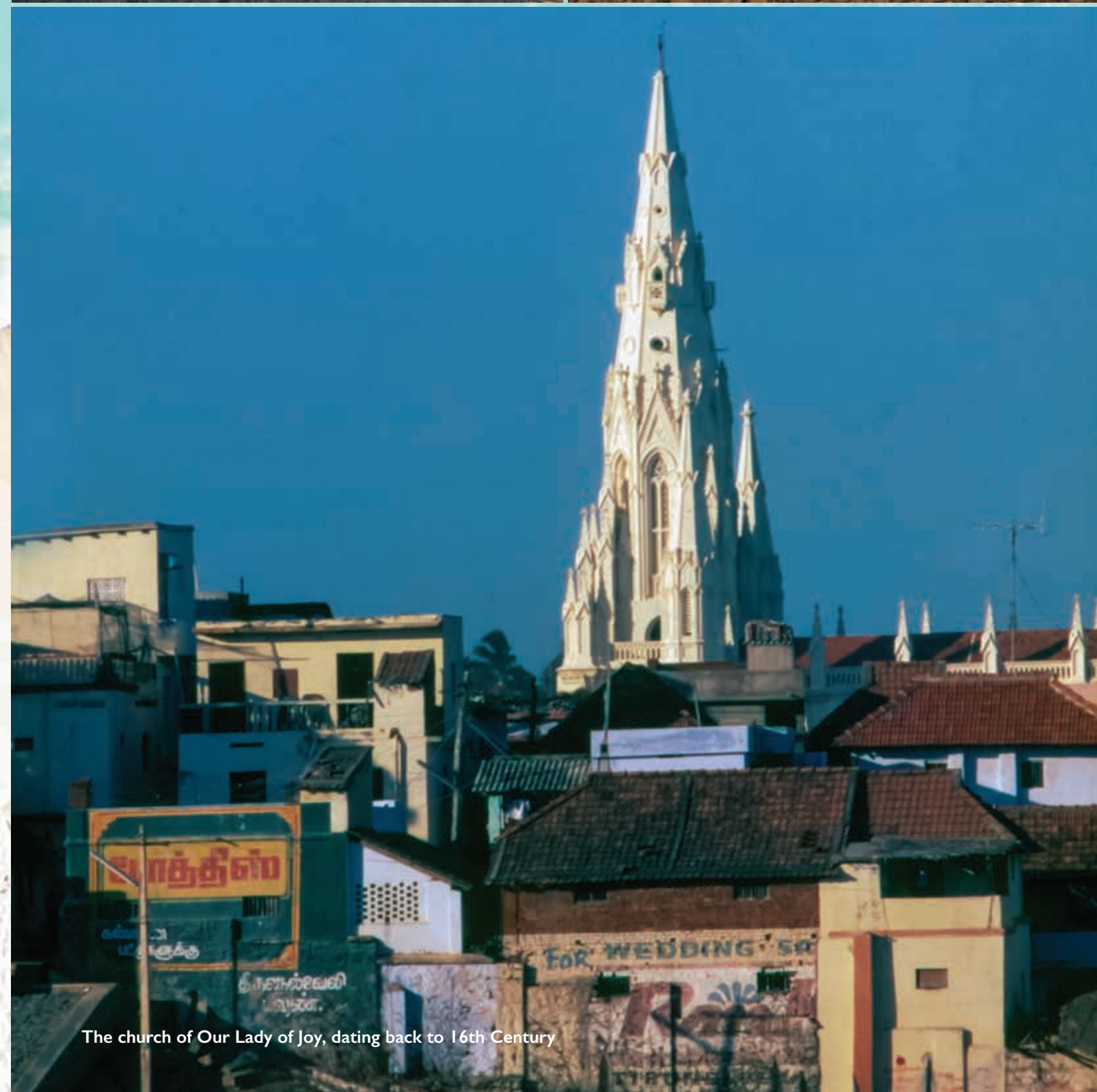
We were sitting on the verandah of Devasthanam Lodge, one of the oldest lodging places in Kanyakumari. We had driven in from Thiruvananthapuram earlier that afternoon and had spent the evening sight-seeing. After a wonderful sunset and an early



The bathing ghat and the adjoining stone mandap



Commerce of different kinds



The church of Our Lady of Joy, dating back to 16th Century

supper, we had returned to our room for the night. Krishna Pillai, a man in his 50s, was the disgruntled manager of the lodge. As I silently pondered over his words, I was disturbed by their negative import.

Outside, the din and bustle of the township, the human noise and, indeed, all human endeavor, seemed to be subdued by the crashing of the surf, the shattered music of the sea. I could understand Krishna Pillai's bitterness well enough; it was the disenchantment of a man who had spent the best part of his life struggling against the inexorably changing lifestyle of a busy tourist center. And his words reminded me of my own first visit to Kanyakumari 40 years ago.



We were a family of 15, men women and children. We had stayed in an even older Devasthanam Lodge, a large, sprawling, tiled house, one end of which was bounded by the sea. I remember that the room rent was Rs. 2 per day! All the doors and windows were left open throughout the night and the breeze blew mightily through the rooms and out into the sea. In the narrow street outside, a few shops sold shells, beads, bangles, hand-woven baskets and mats. When my aunt bought a woven grass mat for eight rupees and walked off with it without haggling over the price, the shocked vendor ran after her and, with a shy smile, gave her back two rupees. Sparrows chirped and flew around. The atmosphere was relaxed and idyllic, and reviewed through the eyes of nostalgia, altogether wonderful. Things have changed all right, but then such change is inevitable in 40 or 50 years.

Cape Kanya Kumari (or Cape Comorin, to use the anglicized name) is situated in the southernmost district of the state of Tamil Nadu. It is the tip of peninsular India. Here the waters of the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea mingle. Overlooking this confluence of three seas is the Kumari Amman temple dedicated to Devi Kumari, the Virgin Goddess. Nearby, there is also a rock-ringed bathing ghat where most of the visitors take a ritual dip. The presence of the temple and belief in the spiritual value of a bath in the confluence have made Kanyakumari an important center of pilgrimage.

The Township

Kanyakumari township is a cluster of shops and hotels which have sprung up around the temple. It has a population of around 20,000. Most of the native inhabitants are fisher folk who live in the adjoining fishing village. Hundreds of their catamarans can be seen every morning as they put out to sea; and every evening, as they return with the day's catch. One of the oldest Catholic churches in the area is located within their village, the church of Our Lady of Joy, founded in the sixteenth century by Saint Francis Xavier.

The township has two main streets, both lined with shops, lodges and eateries. The shops sell trinkets, shells and handicrafts. Aside from

Virgin Goddess

According to legend, the virgin goddess of the Kumari Amman temple had vowed to remain a *kanya* or virgin when her marriage to Lord Shiva was aborted at the last minute by jealous gods. The temple itself is of great antiquity, and is said to have been mentioned by ancient Greek geographers starting with Eratosthenes 2,000 years ago. Small as temples go, a high wall encloses it so that it is barely visible from outside. All the entrances but one—a huge wooden door outside which worshippers shed their shoes and men their shirts—are permanently closed. The reason for these closed doors is an old story according to which, the nose-stud on

the shops, there are innumerable vendors, many of them children, who make the rounds with shell key-chains, bead necklaces and so on. Their persistence and obvious poverty persuade tourists to buy things they don't really need. Then there are the photographers who accost you with their albums; and well-dressed, well-spoken men, who zealously canvass contributions to various charities. From the minute you step off a bus or train till the moment you start on your return journey, you are at the mercy of one or another of these off-shoots of the tourist trade. To the unprepared, this can be a nerve-wracking experience.

the idol of the Goddess sent out such a great reflection that sailing ships in the distant sea thought it to come from a light-house, steered their course accordingly and got ship-wrecked.

Formerly lit only by flickering oil lamps, the inner sanctum is now lit by tube lights. Pious visitors circumambulate the deity, an idol of black stone with a white face. Only Hindus are permitted to enter the sanctum and traditionally, unmarried girls are discouraged from worshipping here for fear that they too would have trouble getting suitable bridegrooms.



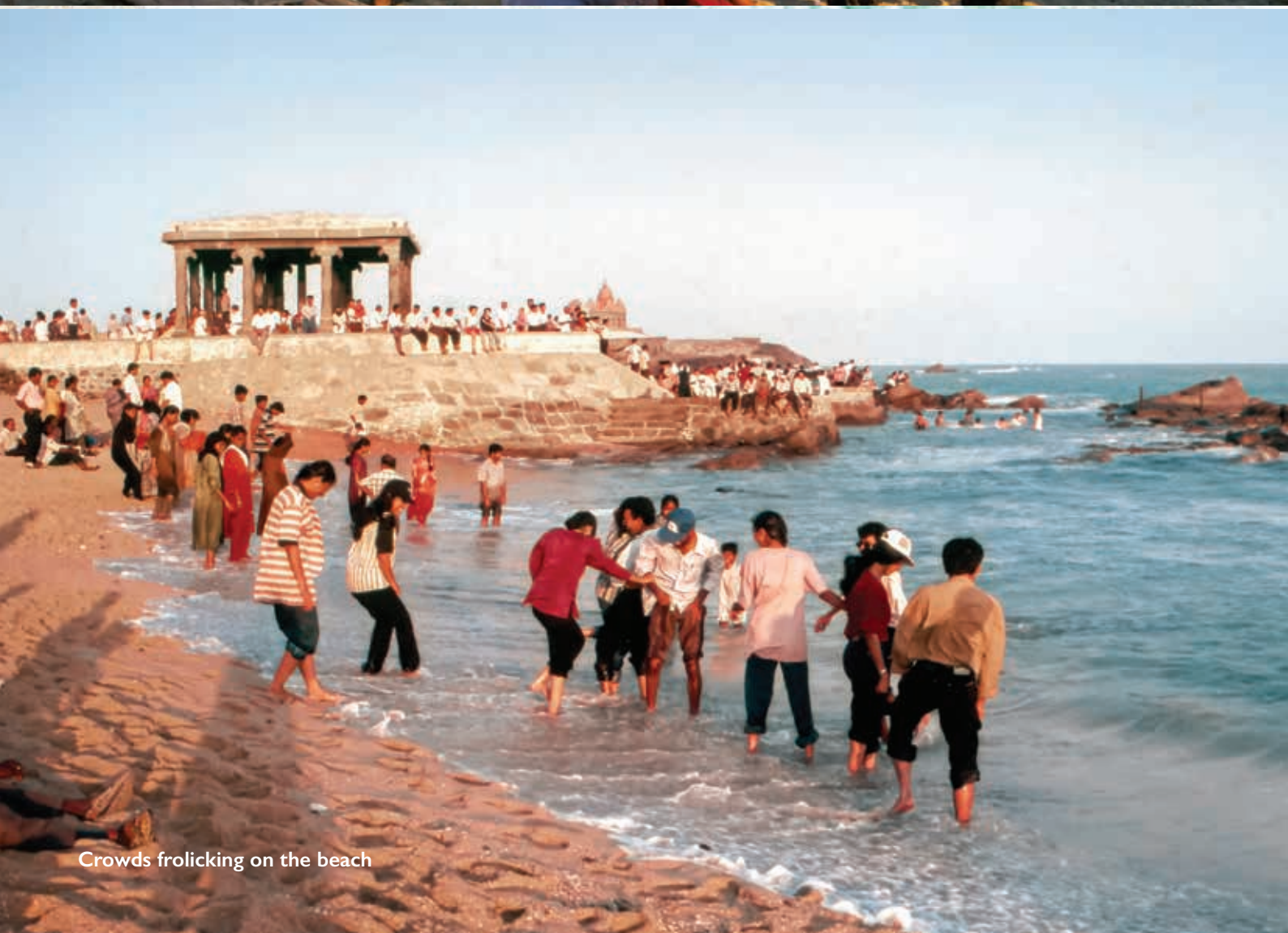
The Rock Memorial

About 500 m from the shoreline southeast of the temple, are two huge rocks. One of these rocks is known as *Sree Pada Parai* or Rock of the Sacred Foot, since it is believed to bear a footprint of the goddess. Swami Vivekananda visited Kanyakumari in 1892, shortly before he left for the United States to participate in the World Parliament of Religions where, we are told, he brought tremendous esteem to India and Indians by his feat of delivering a long speech in the English language. One day, he apparently swam over to this rock where he sat in meditation for a long time. Thereafter, the rock came to be known as Vivekananda Rock. In 1970, a memorial to the Swami was built on this rock.

The Rock Memorial, as it is now called, is said to be a blend of various styles of Indian architecture, and bears an uncanny resemblance to the Victoria Terminus of Mumbai. It consists of three halls. One encloses what people believe to be the divine footprint; another has a statue of Vivekananda; and the third and best hall is a meditation room where visitors are

encouraged to observe and enjoy a few minutes of silence. It is astonishing how, after the heat and the noise and the crowds, a few minutes of deep silence in the cool hall seem to rejuvenate the mind and spirit. For a nominal fee, a half-hourly ferry service will take you to the Rock and back. However it is a very popular excursion and an hour's wait to get a place on board is not unusual.

Another structure that attracts tourists is the Gandhi Mandir. This building encloses the pedestal on which a portion of the ashes of the Mahatma was kept before immersion in the confluence of the three seas. It has been designed in such a way that the sun's rays fall on this pedestal at midday on October 2, Gandhi's birth date, a curiosity sure to elicit the awe of visiting school children. The edifice, built in the *Kalinga* style, has sometimes been described as 'interesting' though one feels that visitors may be forgiven if in a moment of weariness they use stronger words. In the evenings, the *mandap* catches the rays of the setting sun and burns bright red.



Crowds frolicking on the beach



Aparna playing on the sand-hill

Sunrise, Sunset

When you have seen Gandhi Mandir and the Rock Memorial, gone to the temple and taken the ritual bath or washed your feet in the waters of the three seas, there is nothing left for you to do in Kanyakumari — except, of course, to watch the sun rise and set. And, the sunrise and sunset are the greatest crowd-pullers here.

People start drifting out of their rooms as early as 5 a.m. to head for the seashore, where they settle down for a long wait. The crowd keeps growing and the wait continues till the red orb of the sun finally peeps out of the distant sea. If the day is cloudy, the sun may take longer to put in an appearance. But the crowd waits patiently. Similarly, in

the evening, large batches of tourists move expectantly towards the west where there used to be a sand hill. This hill has long since disappeared, owing to the action of the wind. But the place still retains the name, and from convenient vantage points crowds of tourists, in hushed silence, watch the sun set. Just as the sun is about to disappear, one can see several flashes of light as optimistic visitors try to capture the splendid spectacle on film.

On the day of *Chaithra Pournami*, which falls in April/May, Kanyakumari offers the visitor a special delight. On this day one can see the sun set and the moon rise on the same horizon at the same time! Literally thousands gather to watch this marvel.

Shopping

Shopping in Kanyakumari is restricted to shopping for trinkets: mainly shells and artifacts made of shells like necklaces, shell chains, bead curtains and paperweights. There are also mats and other coir and straw products on sale, not to mention toys like locally made kaleidoscopes which never fail to delight children. A useful thing a visitor can buy at the very beginning of a visit is a wide-brimmed straw hat which protects the head and face from the blistering day-time sun without at the same time obstructing air circulation.

Cape Kanyakumari was one of the places badly hit by the Tsunami in the December of 2004. The presence of the two large rocks with their rigid stone structures as well as the rock-fringed shoreline absorbed much of the impact of the Tsunami which nevertheless caused a great deal of havoc including a high death toll. One of its aftereffects has been to add yet another item to the sea-side shops: namely the Tsunami cassettes. Today you find many shops advertising this specialty: video footage of the Tsunami (photographed quite amateurishly by a local videographer)!



How others see us

The majority of visitors to Kanyakumari come from Kerala and other neighboring states, not to mention Tamil Nadu itself. But busloads of pilgrims and casual travellers from all over India do visit this place, if only for the satisfaction of having set foot on the southernmost tip of the country. One can also see occasional groups of foreigners. I talked to one such group from Canada in order to find out what they felt about the Cape as a tourist spot.

“Too many people, too much noise,” said Dr Allen Speller, a medical doctor on his first visit to this country. The same opinion was voiced by the other members of his group. It occurred to me that the description suited not just Kanyakumari, but the rest of India as well. The criticism is justified. It requires no great imagination to see how the constant onslaught of touts, peddlers and

beggars, not to mention the unending blare of music from loud-speakers must affect the first-time visitor unused to such things. At the same time, native travellers seemed to feel at home in the ambience of the place. Our next-door neighbor at the lodge, Shyju George, a young freelance photographer from Kerala, at first had difficulty getting a room. “Lodges are wary of letting out rooms to young men traveling alone,” he said. “Apparently, a number of them, suffering the pangs of unrequited love, come here every year to end their lives.” Shyju sported a rather stylish beard which the elderly manager had taken to be a sure sign of some deep-seated despair! Nevertheless, having surmounted the initial difficulty, Shyju seemed to be enjoying himself. In particular, he said, Kanyakumari offers endless delights to the avid photographer.



Fortune telling using cards and a parakeet



Shopping for bead curtains

Bustling Commerce

At first glance, the township of Kanyakumari gives the impression of bustling commerce and moderate affluence. But there is a bleaker side to the picture, of which I had a fleeting glimpse. We had finished for the day, the sun was about to set and before starting on our return journey we decided on some coffee. We were about to drink it when, an old man came up to me and tried to sell me a small bunch of bananas. I declined the bananas but invited him to have a cup with us. His name was Suppaiah and at 65 he was still trying to support his family as a daily laborer. But work was difficult to come by, for in a tourist center, only commercial activities seem to thrive. Suppaiah had no education, no skills, no capital to start a business, nothing, and so he and his family perpetually lived on the brink of destitution.

I gave him some coffee. Unused to drinking from a paper cup, he gripped it too hard. The cup crumpled in his hand, spilling the scalding liquid over his gnarled palm. I gave him another cup, this time of tea, and cautioned

him to be careful. He took a few sips of the tea, then a long pull; and then, to my shock, I saw him add the coffee that remained in the first cup to the tea and drink up the mixture with evident satisfaction.

It was in a sober frame of mind that I made my way back to the lodge. Soon darkness came rushing in from the sea and covered the little township of Kanyakumari. One by one the shops lit their lamps, and still the indefatigable crowd milled around collecting trinkets of every kind. We piled our things into the car and started on our return drive. Behind us, in the distance, the lights of the township twinkled cheerfully. I thought of Suppaiah, whose life is lived at a level where the distinction between coffee and tea is a philosophical luxury he cannot afford to indulge. Commerce and a prospering tourist trade will certainly bring development and affluence to Kanyakumari. But what will this affluence do for Suppaiah? For people like him? My mind asked these questions over and over again, but the darkness made no answer.



The Rock Memorial and the Statue of Thiruvalluvar



The Gandhi Mandir



Blackbuck pair



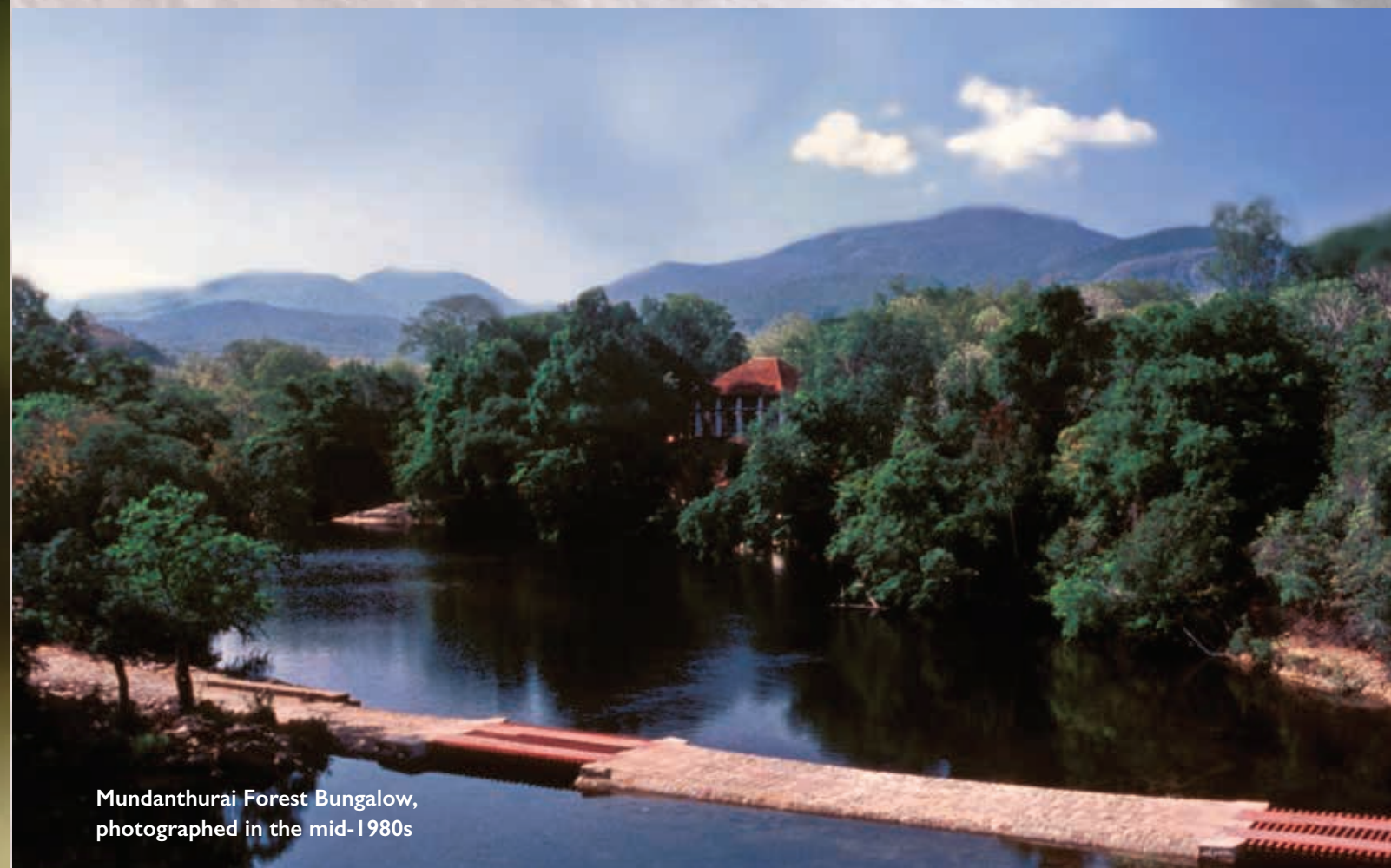
Rock Agama

MUNDANTHURAI

Dusk had fallen. Our guide Narayanan quickened his pace on the tarred road that bisected the forest.

The bushes on either side seemed to be on fire, lit by millions of twinkling fire-flies. Occasionally, a black-naped hare would scurry across our path to disappear into the thicket. Suddenly Narayanan held up his hand and we froze in our tracks. A little ahead of us, the thicket seemed to tremble as if from

a strong gust of wind. We held our breath. Slowly, a majestic Sambar stag stepped out and stood still long enough for us to admire the sheen of moonlight on his pelt and his splendid antlers. Then, soundlessly, he glided across the path, and disappeared into the forest on the other side. Never before had we witnessed so noble a sight. Such was my introduction to Mundanthurai WLS of Tamil Nadu. This happened sometime in 1979.



Mundanthurai Forest Bungalow,
photographed in the mid-1980s



A closer view of the Bungalow



The Servalar flows close to the Bungalow

Jungle delights

Experiences of this kind are not rare events in Mundanthurai. Here is another from another visit. The time was around 2 p.m. one summer afternoon and it must have been quite hot out in the open. But we were in a riverine forest belt, comfortably resting under huge trees by a stream. We had been walking since early morning and it felt good to relax there in the shade, surrounded by the cool breeze and the silence of the jungle and the sound of flowing water. We had just finished eating a packed picnic lunch, and it was tempting to close the eyes and doze off. Suddenly I saw a lone wild dog appear on the opposite bank. There was no sign of the pack which I guessed must be nearby sheltering from the mid-day heat. The wild dog stood still for a while, looking intently in our direction, but the breeze was blowing towards us and there was no way it could see us. Then, satisfied, it moved off a little way and slowly

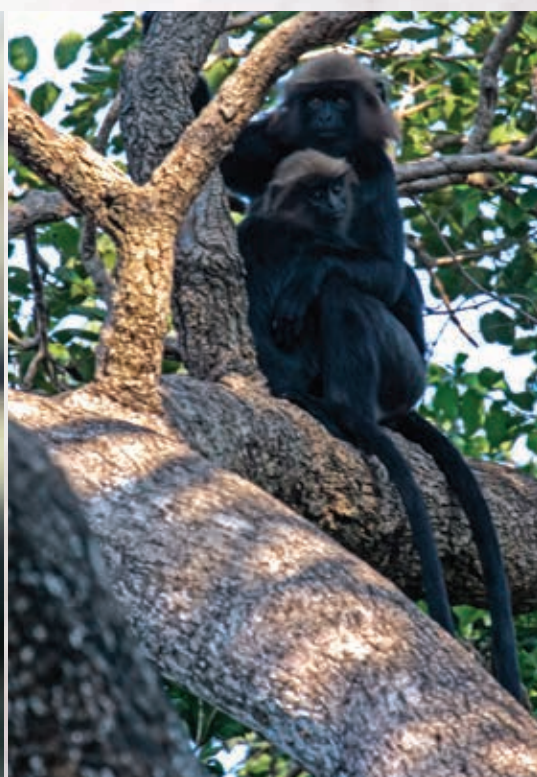
crossed the shallow stream.

Till then everything had been calm and silent in the forest, but as soon as the wild dog reached our bank, a strange thing happened. All at once, the jungle burst into noise. It was like an explosion of sound and it took us by surprise. Birds started to call. Up above us on the wind-swept canopy, frightened Langur monkeys and Giant-squirrels raised a great clamour. From the scrub forest a little behind us came the alarm calls of disturbed herds of Chital and the more distant 'belling' of Sambar deer. We had not dreamed that so many animals surrounded us even when we could see none, even when we were sure that we were alone! The dog soon disappeared from view, but for many minutes thereafter we could follow his course through the forest by the repeated alarm calls of frightened herbivores.

The Sanctuary

Mundanthurai sanctuary, in which both incidents described above took place over four decades ago, now forms part of the Kalakkad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve under 'Project Tiger'. The Reserve with a total area of around 800 km² is part of the Ashambu hills of the Western Ghats and includes one of the few relatively undisturbed tropical rain forests left in our country. The exceptional plant and animal diversity of the area has attracted biologists from all over the world who have

conducted studies here over the past years. The tourism zone of this Tiger Reserve is the Mundanthurai plateau, a small area of around 60 km² which is a nature lover's paradise. The rivers *Tamiraparni* and *Servalar* flow through it giving succour to a wealth of animal and plant life which abound in this area. By the riverside, set against the backdrop of the far hills, a quaint, old Forest Rest House built in the days of the British Raj can be seen, which makes an inviting spectacle. This Forest Rest House goes back to over a



The four species of leaf-eating monkeys in the South seen in Mundanthurai
L to R - Bonnet macaque, Common Langur, Nilgiri Langur, Lion-tailed macaque

hundred or hundred and fifty years, though it has been renovated in recent years. It is a pleasant place to stay in, and the *Servalar* river flowing nearby adds to the ambience. During daytime, the bungalow and its grounds are the domain of troops of Bonnet macaques and also itinerant troops of Nilgiri langur. The Bonnets are apt to invade your rooms if you are not careful to keep the doors and windows shut at all times, and decamp with whatever they can lay their hands on. A visitor once brought with him a packet of imported

chocolates which mysteriously disappeared from his room. A search revealed a trail of toffees leading straight to a nearby tree and a monkey up there enjoying a wasteful meal of the delicacy, wrappers and all! The langurs on the other hand are wary creatures who habitually keep to the tall branches of the trees and rarely come down. A short distance away, there are also troops of the Common langur. And a dozen kilometres into the hills are found the highly endangered Lion-tailed macaques.

Fauna

The plateau itself is covered with scrub jungle, with tall trees lining the banks of the rivers. This is the ideal habitat of a large variety of birds and animals like Malabar Giant-squirrels, Chital, Sambar, Wild dog, Jackal, Wild boar, Sloth bear, Leopard and the occasional Tiger. As a rule Gaur and Elephants do not come down to the plateau but keep themselves to the hills where they find no dearth of food and water. This makes Mundanthurai a safe and convenient place for long walks through the jungle. The absence of elephants enables you to amble along the jungle trails, over flat and easy terrain, to your heart's content, even after nightfall, but

of course only after obtaining permission to do so from the Officer in charge. During such a walk you can expect to see a variety of wild life. Mundanthurai is one of the few areas in the country where in the course of a day's walk you can see all four types of monkeys found in South India, and also that elusive nocturnal primate, the Slender Loris. No wonder then that primatologists from different parts of the world are attracted to this little known corner of our country. Apart from these various species of primates, a determined visitor not averse to walking can also hope to see a large variety of birds, especially along the bank of the river.

Then and Now

I visited Mundanthurai several times after these initial experiences in that enchanted forest which I have already described. Many of these visits were in the company

of friends interested in wildlife, and with visitors from abroad who wanted to taste the wilderness of India.

With the passage of years, things have



The Malabar Giant-squirrel



The old hanging bridge which used to span the river during my first visit in 1979



Picture taken on a visit, accompanied by Ady, Axel and Nicky. With us too was my close friend Babu Jayan...One such visit was with Axel, Ady and Nikki, along with my close friend Babu Jayan whose untimely demise some years ago immersed me and all his friends in sorrow This picture shows Babu [right] and Axel relaxing on the rocks of Servalar



Aparna shows off some of her artwork



Shanthi holding up the skull of a deer we found in the shallow water



Aparna with friends –YonTen, and Maya, on the rocks of Servalar

changed, as they are bound to. My first visit was in 1979. Since then, a dam has been constructed and commissioned across the Servalar river. Again, some years ago, a storm along with its attendant flooding washed away the iron bridge spanning the river in Mundanthurai, and the hanging bridge, along with a large number of trees from the river bank as well as many people living in the

low-lying areas. The commissioning of the Servalar dam has resulted in a substantial increase in vehicular traffic in the area. And Narayanan, the son of a forest guard, who had acted as my guide on daily wages during my first visit, now had a PhD from the United States, and was teaching field biology in a University there!

A walk along the river bank

After lunch on the first day after reaching the sanctuary, we sat on the smooth rocks near the stream. It was cloudy, and we watched wagtails and kingfishers busily going about their affairs -- also a white-breasted kingfisher holding a live lizard in its beak. Orange tadpoles swam in shallow pools and a variety of striped and colored fish came to nibble at our toes, much to my daughter's delight. On a rock nearby a perfectly camouflaged Rock Agama (lizard) sat absolutely still, waiting for its prey.

Walking along the river bank, we came upon huge trees, their roots sometimes exposed by erosion, a frightening sight. This was the home of the Malabar Giant-squirrel and we had to sit in silence for about ten minutes before we sighted a pair of the brownish red creatures, playfully chasing each other on the branches. They were quite lost in their game till they spotted us and immediately withdrew. As we moved ahead, the path got progressively worse. Now and again it would disappear, and we had to wade through water, clamber up rocks or crawl through the dense growth of scrub. Suddenly, round a bend,

we surprised a small herd of sambar deer, apparently coming down to drink. There was an unexpected alarm call. At close quarters, a sambar's "belling" as it is called, a deep, loud, abdominal sound, can make you jump right out of your skin. The heavy sound of running hooves was followed by a crashing in the undergrowth. This was obviously a favorite drinking spot of many animals, judging by the signs on the sand bank.

For the same reason, predators also favored the place: we found the head and bones of a deer in shallow water, that had probably been devoured by a leopard. On the sand bank we also saw the spoor of a wild dog or jackal; and the larger pug marks of a leopard too. Another inhabitant of this riverine forest is the black Nilgiri Langur, distinguishable by a white ruff round its head, found only in parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. On our way back, we came across a troupe of around 40 of them, busy feeding.

Nilgiri langurs are wary of humans because they have been extensively hunted for the supposed medicinal properties of their flesh.



A Nilgiri Langur in mid leap



A Sambar straight out of a mud wallow



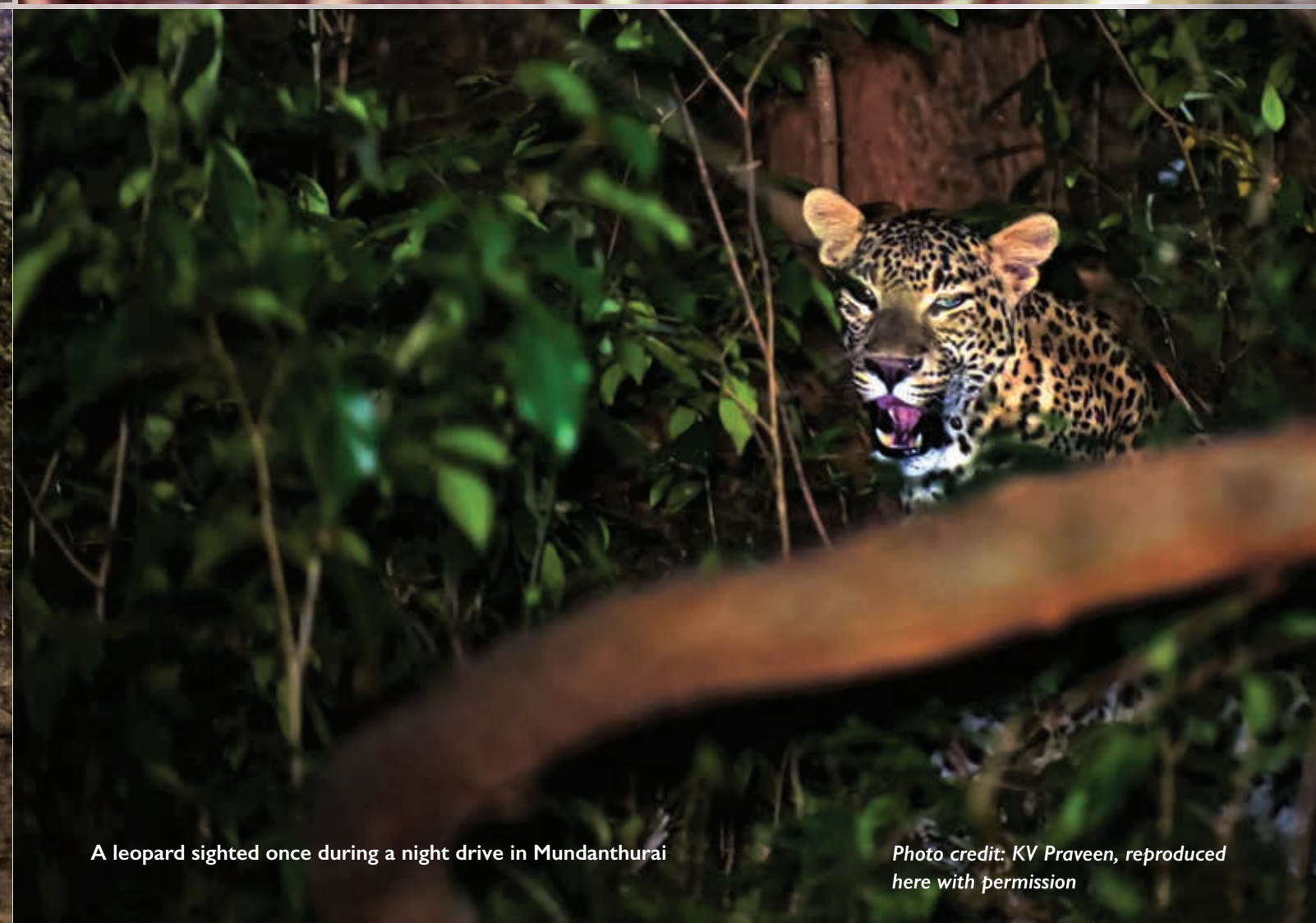
Shanthi and Aparna, on a later visit, by the Servalar



A lone Wild Dog

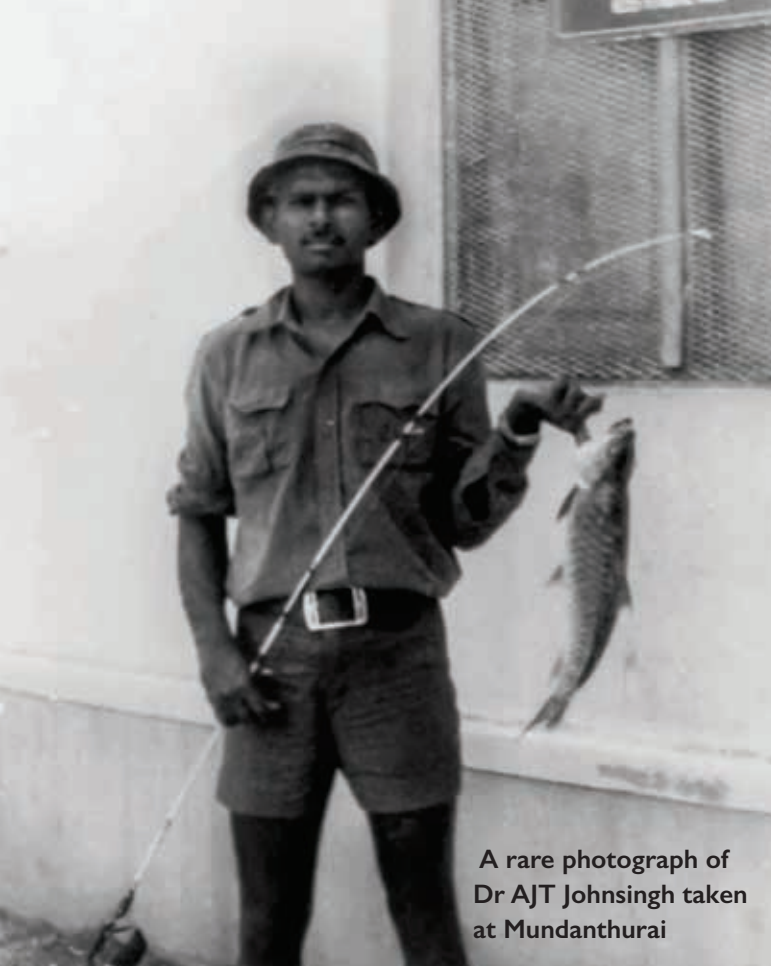


Out for an evening walk, close to sunset



A leopard sighted once during a night drive in Mundanthurai

Photo credit: KV Praveen, reproduced here with permission



A rare photograph of Dr AJT Johnsingh taken at Mundanthurai



A night-flowering Cactus



(The first car we owned, a Morris-8, 1948 model, traversing Puckle's Path in Mundanthurai WLS. Bought for Rs.6000/-, and used for many years, it had to be sold when spares, including tyres, became impossible to source. Unlike many antique cars, our car was not a show piece, but one in daily use.)

(Needless to say, this medicinal virtue of their flesh is a superstition spread and nourished by generations of quacks.) On seeing us, though we stood immobile, the whole troupe

fled swiftly along the tree-ways. Their agility and acrobatic skills were miraculous, and we watched in awe their mighty leaps and their split-second timing.

Early morning birding

One of the most enjoyable parts of staying at Mundanthurai is an early morning stroll through the forest.

The road passing through Mundanthurai splits into three at the entrance to the Rest House: one goes up to the Papanasam Upper dam, one leads down to the Lower dam and thence to the township of Papanasam, and the third goes towards the Servalar dam site. A walk in any of these directions can be a brazing experience and a real treat for bird watchers. It would be a rare day indeed when you return without having spotted at least thirty

different species. Birds of prey like the Crested hawk-eagle and the Black-winged kite are commonly seen. Many species of kingfishers and wagtails abound on the water's edge. You will also come across less conspicuous small birds, more often heard than seen, like the Spotted babbler with its strange, lilting, musical, whistling call. All along the way, you are accompanied by the subdued cooing of Spotted doves. All three roads are tarred, but on either side one can also expect to see wild animals.

Jungle trails

Then there are the jungle trails, untarred paths into the forest, which give a real taste of the wilderness.

One such is Puckle's Path, a circuitous route of around 12 km which affords a good chance of wildlife viewing. Such trails are, however, better tackled in daylight, for a sudden close encounter with a Leopard or a Sloth-bear can be dangerous. Driving slowly along the road in a car is better than walking. Animals have become habituated to the sound of motor vehicles, but not to human scent and human noise. Of course, all sightings are a matter of luck.

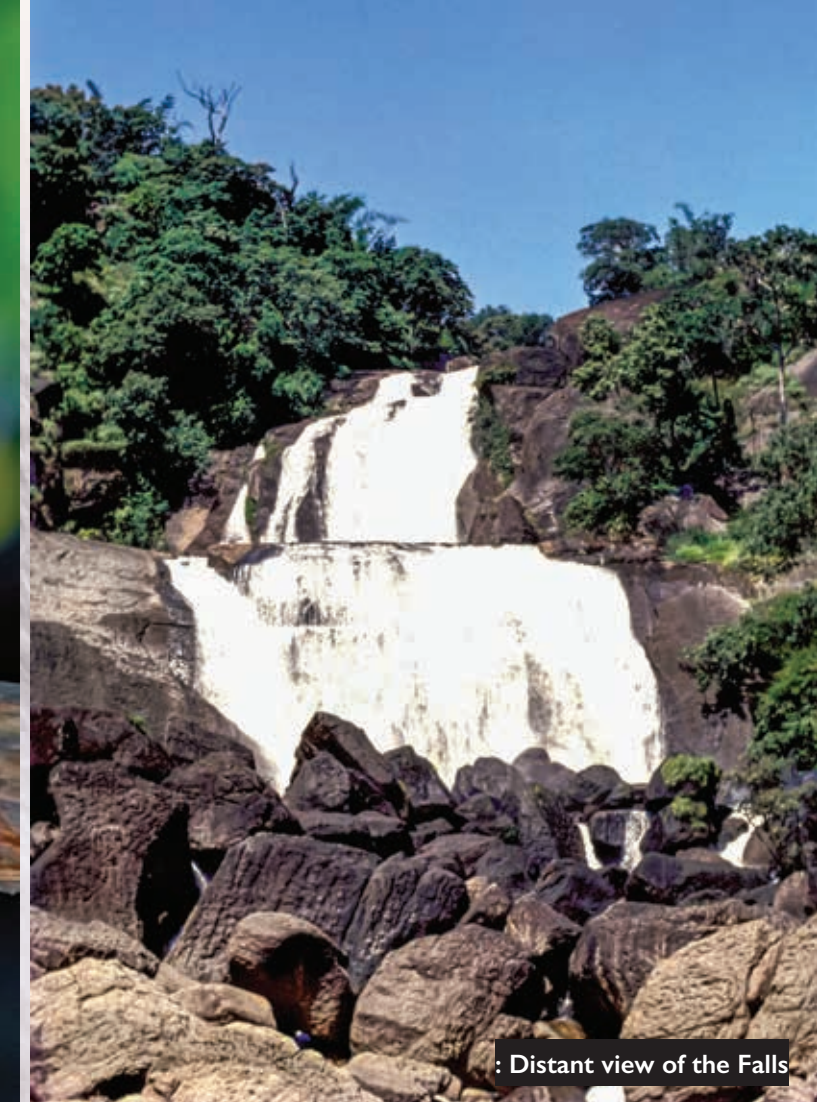
After supper, at about 9 pm, we set off in search of the Slender Loris: small, shy, completely nocturnal and very difficult to spot because it sits ensconced in thick foliage. The only way to spot it is to walk slowly, shining a powerful torch at shrubs overhead in the hope that the animal looks directly into your beam. If it does, the Slender Loris suddenly becomes the most conspicuous thing in the vicinity: two large eyes, blood red and unblinking, stare at you, an unforgettable sight. Unfortunately, this has spelt trouble for the poor creatures; they are ruthlessly hunted for their eyes, which quacks believe to be imbued with miraculous medicinal properties.



A Slender Loris cautiously peers out of the foliage



A Ceylon Frogmouth



: Distant view of the Falls



Herd of Spotted deer



On the way to Banatheertham falls,
Sri Lanka

With Dr. Johnsingh

Talking about walks at night reminds me of just such a walk I had with the great naturalist Dr. Johnsingh, one of India's leading wildlife biologists, and his pupil and my dear friend, the late lamented Ajay Desai. A terrific rain had just stopped and all the jungle lay fresh and vibrant that

night. It was a very educative walk, with Dr. Johnsingh pointing out various life forms of interest on the way, including a huge mass of ants on their way from, presumably, one habitation to another, and catching by torchlight the gleaming eyes of a spider clinging to the bark of a tree far away.

Deer valley and Slender Loris after nightfall

So much for reminiscence. This day, half an hour's brisk walk brought us to grassy meadows fringed with a few small shrubs. This was locally known as "deer valley" where, in the evenings, herds of spotted deer congregate. My flashlight picked up small herds grazing, their eyes burning in the night like points of fire. I remembered with sorrow that on my first visit in 1979, the deer population on the meadow was much larger: it seemed to have dwindled considerably in the intervening years. It took us another hour to locate the Loris. I

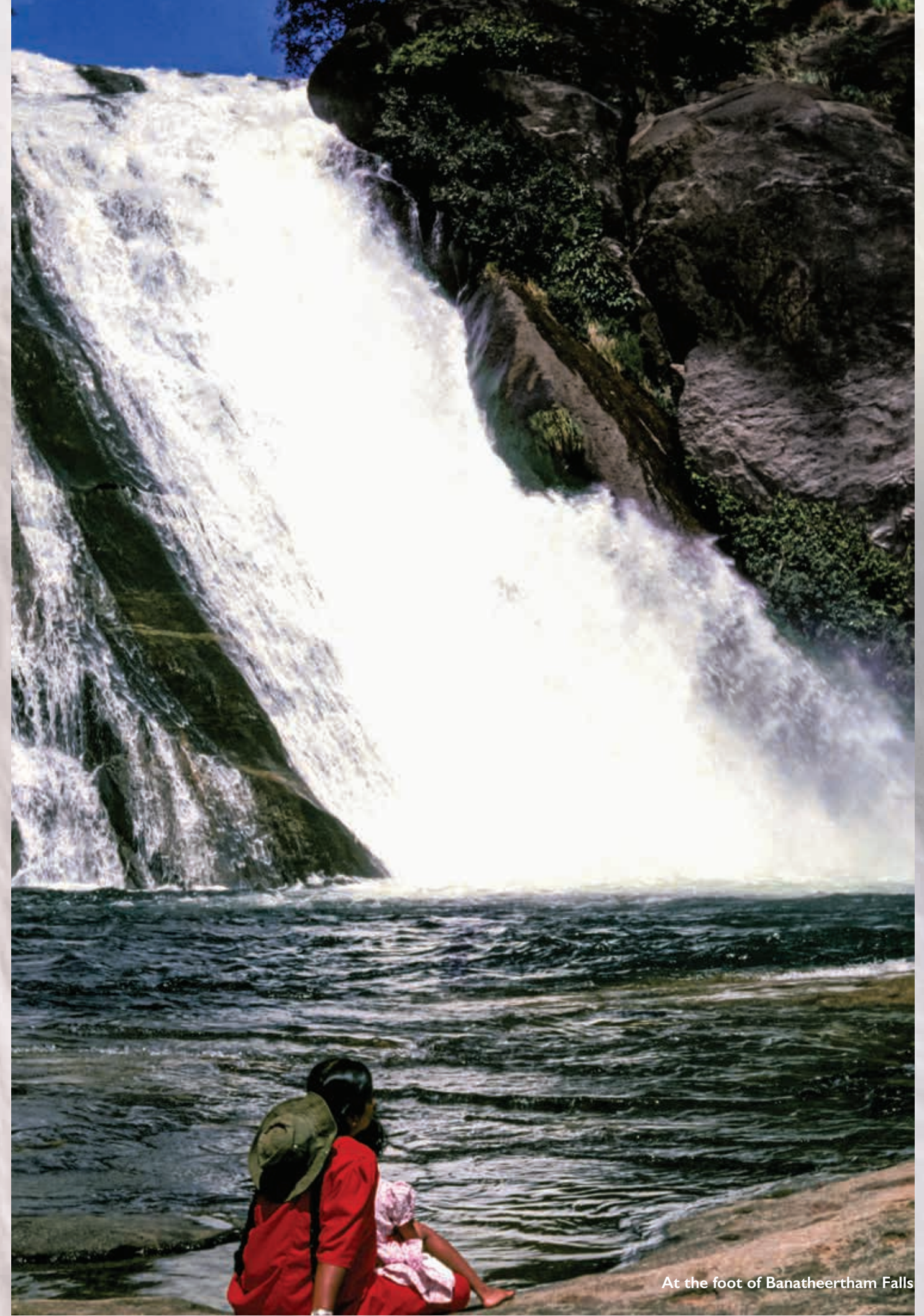
had hoped for a glimpse of the animal and that is precisely what we got -- a glimpse. It stared into our beam for a few seconds, with large, unblinking red eyes and then abruptly turned its face away. With that act, it was as if the animal had simply disappeared. We waited for a while, but it started to drizzle and we shelved the idea of photographing it this time round. On the way back, we saw a jackal slinking by. If you want to sense the sinuousness of the word "slink," you should see a jackal moving around at night.

On The Water

If you tire of walks and watching birds and animals, Mundanthurai has diversions in the form of a long boat ride and a short trek. From the upper camp, 8 km away from the forest bungalow, you can hire a boat to the *Banatheertham* waterfalls. It takes almost an

hour to cross the reservoir, though some boats equipped with out-board motors are available, which are faster.

After landing, a steep climb of about one kilometre takes you to the magnificent *Banatheertham* falls. Immediately after the



At the foot of Banatheertham Falls

rains, the torrential descent of water is awe-inspiring. Bathing here is risky business and is best avoided. The more adventurous can

Papa

Back at the bungalow, an old acquaintance was waiting for us. She was Papa, who, during our first visit to Mundanthurai, would come to the bungalow and help the watch-man with the cooking. Time had obviously done nothing to better her lot. I noticed that there were some ugly looking scars on her forearm, as if she had been in an accident. When I asked her about them, Papa's face lit up with a shy smile. "An animal scratched me," she said. Upon further questioning, little by little the story emerged.

trek 5 or 6 km through the forest to reach the *Pampanar* stream, and bathe in its cool, cascading waters.

Apparently, Papa had had an argument with a leopard. She lived in a small hovel on a rock near the jungle. One night a leopard came in and caught her sole earthly possession, her goat. The animal's pathetic bleating and the leopard's growls woke her. Without a moment's hesitation, Papa joined issue with the leopard. In the tug-of-war for the goat that followed, Papa emerged victorious. The leopard ran off into the jungle, the goat recovered in due course, and Papa lived to tell the tale!

Peaceful sanctuary, under threat

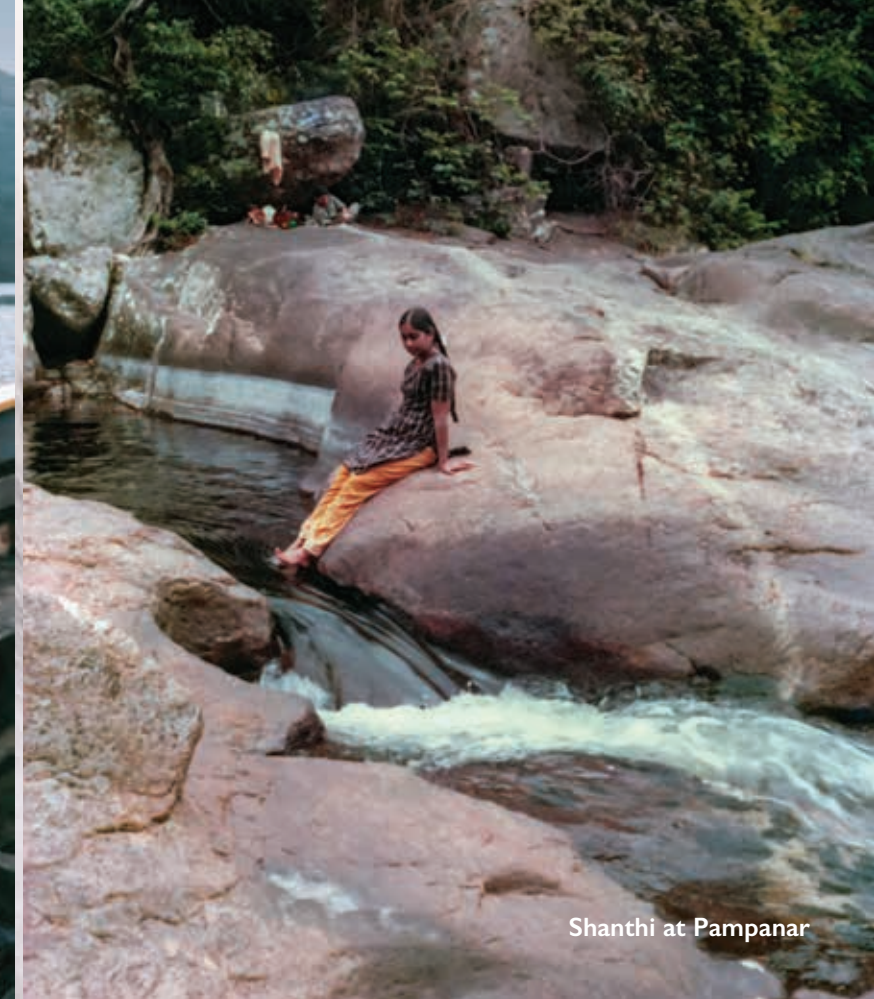
Mundanthurai is not a glamorous wildlife sanctuary such as one finds elsewhere in India. with milling crowds of tourists chasing large mammals. It has no established routine of safaris for visitors. Everything is low-key here, with poor infrastructure and limited facilities. Indeed, that is part of its charm. It is an ideal place for anyone looking for Spartan fare, plenty of exercise in the open air, delicious, long baths in forest streams and absolute peace and quiet.

But all that seems to be on the verge of extinction. In a recent Tamil film, some popular "stars" were shown dancing against the background of the *Banatheertham* falls. Thereafter, busloads of visitors have started

making the trip to *Banatheertham* in a kind of perverse pilgrimage. The rush reaches its peak during the season at nearby *Kuttralam*, immediately after the rains. Ms.Jayasree, a student of primatology in an American university who was at Mundanthurai at the time of our visit told us that during the last season, the collection at the forest check-post exceeded Rs. 70,000 in a single weekend! Again, a small temple, a few kilometers into the jungle, holds a festival every August which used to be attended by a few hundred local people. But last year, following a clever advertising campaign by the custodians of the temple, more than 1,00,000 people came for the festival. They spent three days and nights in



Aparna and Shanthi on the boat



Shanthi at Pampanar



Blister beetles

the forest. In the absence of any infrastructure to cater to the needs of such huge numbers, one can imagine the colossal residue of filth and litter and pollution they left behind. Needless to say, this kind of over-exploitation does not augur well for a wildlife sanctuary. Still, as long as the charm of solitude and

the lure of wild places are not completely extinguished in the mind of man, there will always be a few dedicated individuals who will do their best to preserve the inviolability of such places. And with that we have to be content.

A Quack in Mundanthurai Tiger Sanctuary

(How a lie, even a white lie, can come round and bite you on the bum)

The Mundanthurai Wildlife Sanctuary and its beautiful Forest Rest House built over a hundred years ago have long been a favourite destination for me. The place is unforgettable for me for more reasons than one. As those who read the following will realize....

At least thirty-five years ago, we went on a trip to Mundanthurai. My daughter Aparna was just two or three years old and that was to be her first forest sojourn. We were accompanied by our friend Dr. Velayudhan and his family. In fact, it was Dr. Velayudhan who initiated the trip. He was invited to visit the place by an IFS officer whom he had befriended and who was at that time Conservator of Forests stationed at Tirunelveli. Since I was familiar with the area, we also decided to tag along.

To cut a long story short, we drove into Mundanthurai one afternoon. Since we were the Conservator's guests, we were met there by the Assistant Conservator, an efficient

and honest officer who rejoiced in the name Sundaravadivelu. I introduced Dr. Velayudhan as the Superintendent of the General Hospital, which he then was, and myself as a Professor in a college in Trivandrum. We stayed there for two or three days and had a wonderful time.

Two or three months later, I made a cycling trip to Mundanthurai, which was some 210 kilometers from Trivandrum. Two friends accompanied me. I had contacted the Assistant Conservator whom we had met on the previous occasion, for reservation of accommodation. He readily complied and said he was scheduled to be in Mundanthurai on that week-end and that he was looking forward to meeting me there.

We reached there a day later than expected. The original plan was to reach there the same day, but we were caught in the opposing winds of the Arulvaimozhi Pass, a terrible, driving wind which was like a concrete wall impeding our progress. Both my friends



A Dragonfly perched on a blade of grass beside a jungle stream burns bright, lit now and again by a single shaft of sunlight filtering in through the thick canopy



Cyclists, on the way



Aparna in her natural habitat

were blown off along with their cycles onto the path on more than one occasion. Finally bushed and sun-burnt, we were forced to stay the night in Ambasamudram, a small township on the way, and reach Mundanthurai by breakfast time the next day.

The Assistant Conservator was on the brink of leaving after his official visit when we arrived. He greeted us and called the Range Forest officer and introduced me to him. “This is my intimate friend, Dr. Vinaya Kumar”, he said. What the hell. I didn’t, and don’t have a doctorate (or even a ‘compounderate’, as my Professor KK Neelakantan, of revered memory, used to say), but it is a mistake which people usually make. College professors, in public imagination, are supposed to be encumbered with a PhD. And it would have been peevish on my part to protest and say at that point, “No, no, I don’t have a PhD!”, especially after he had introduced me to his subordinate as his “intimate friend”. So I kept quiet.

But the Assistant Conservator wasn’t done yet. “He is a Professor”, he continued, “in the Trivandrum Medical College in Kerala. Please make his stay and that of his friends as comfortable as possible.” With these words, he climbed into his jeep and started off.

It was obvious that the Officer, in his endeavor to be helpful, was inextricably mixing up Dr. Velayudhan and myself. And for the moment there was nothing to be done. In any case, it could do no harm, this ‘little, unremembered act’ of mixing up the professions of two people by an officer trying his best to be helpful to one of them.

Or so I thought.

We were relaxing in the room after a sumptuous vegetarian lunch, when the Bungalow watcher came into the room. “Sir”, he said, “some people have come to see you.” People? To see me? I went outside and was met by a line of around eight or ten people, both men and women, some with little kids in tow. “Sir,” the Bungalow watcher continued, “I heard the Warden Sir tell the Range Officer sir that you are an eminent doctor from the Kerala Medical college. I passed on the wonderful news to the local people. Now they have come to see you sir, and to have the honour of being treated for their illnesses. My wife and daughter will come later in the evening. Thank you sir!” I didn’t know what to say. “But... I... I am not...” I stammered. “Yes Sir,” said the Watcher guy joyfully, cutting me off, “the Kerala Medical College. I heard. I have told everyone. Thank you sir!”

He did not realize just how close he came at that moment to assault with extreme prejudice.

Perhaps I am confessing to a crime for which I can be held liable. But for at least two hours that afternoon I was forced to hold an OPD on the verandah of that beautiful Forest guest house. Thanks to my continuing friendship with numerous classmates who had gone on to become medical doctors, I was familiar with their terminology. The waiting patients came with previously issued prescriptions. Wherever I saw something like “Primary complex” on the tattered papers, I at once referred them to the General Hospital in Tirunelveli. The burden of my song that deathly afternoon was, “*Kuzhalu kizhalu onnumey kidayathu....*” (I don’t have

a stethoscope or BP apparatus, and no medicines or needles for giving injections.) I sent away the others with a prescription for “*ratha pushti maathirai*” (Vitamins) for a week, followed by medical consultation in the Tirunelveli hospital.

At least fifteen or sixteen patients were disposed of in this manner. May be more. All this was many years ago and I don’t remember the details very well. The incident made me extremely ill-tempered and morose and we whiled away the time till nightfall. Then one of my friends turned to me and said, “Have you thought of what will ensue if a woman in the village happens to have a premature delivery tonight?”

I felt chilled to the bone. Just as well we didn’t have a BP apparatus handy, my BP must have been astronomical at that moment. Straightaway we took our bicycles and our things through the jungle and hid them in the thicket some 300 metres away. We did this as stealthily as possible, in case we should have to make a sudden exit in the middle of the night. The area around held many leopards, but I would meet a leopard in the forest any day than a woman in the throes of a complicated childbirth.

I am happy to report that the worst didn’t happen, and we left on our return trip as planned the next morning.



With my two friends in Mundanthurai



Himalayan Blue poppy *Meconopsis aculeata*

VALLEY OF FLOWERS

Preface

S Vinaya Kumar

The trek to Valley of Flowers organized by the Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam officially begins from Rishikesh, which is the time-honoured entry point to Garhwal Division when it was still part of the Sate of

Uthar Pradesh. But to us South-Indians who come by train to Delhi and thence wish to reach Rishikesh, the easiest thing to do is to go by train to Hardwar, and from there cover the roughly 25 km distance to Rishikesh by bus or taxi cab. And this is what we did that day, in mid- August in 1994. Hardwar was



Devaprayag early in the morning



Gobind Ghat



The flowing stream on our way



Mohan and his wife Vimala

a place of flies, the railway station itself was the dirtiest I have seen before or since. The streets were lined with bhang chewing, ganja smoking sadhus and beggars. We caught a bus to Rishikesh in a short time, and from the bus stop an auto-rickshaw took us to the Tourist Rest House at Muni-ki-Reti. The Manager of the Rest House gave us a cold welcome. Apparently some sort of an agitation was going on in Garhwal – some said an anti-reservation agitation – headed by students. They had spread the word that no government establishment was to host tourists, who were ordered to leave Garhwal, and all Guest Houses were to be closed down. So it wasn't even certain that the trek would take place at all.

There were some hours of anxiety and indecision, but by late evening we came to know that notwithstanding the agitation the roads were open, and we were asked to be ready to depart by bus by 4 a.m.

We started out from the Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam (GMVN for short) Rest-house by 4:30 a.m., on 18-08-1994. There were only less than a dozen of us in the twenty-five seater bus. A few more were expected to join us on the way. Our companions were a Marwadi couple from Varanasi, Rajeev and his wife Abha whom we had met last evening. Rajeev was a businessman, and Abha who resembled Jaya Bhaduri the actress hailed from Darjeeling. Then there were a couple of very spirited and well-travelled ladies from Kolkata, Ratna and Binita, and an elderly pensioner from Pune, Mr. Banhatti, who eventually came to be known affectionately as Uncle-ji.

Soon the scenic countryside captivated our attention. We passed through many inviting, small, sub-Himalayan townships, watered by streams covered in morning mist, and sometimes with a *jhoola* bridge spanning them.

We stopped for breakfast, but soon after that the bus we were travelling in was caught in a jam somewhere near Karna Prayag where there appeared to be some kind of an agitation going on. It was part of the Uttarakhand agitation, we learnt, and there was no telling how long we would be detained there. There was a stage of sorts built a short distance away, and youngsters hardly out of school were ascending the lectern and giving fiery speeches in Hindi. From time to time the crowd of listeners would break into applause. "I will not say that Narasimha Rao is a thief," I heard one speaker hardly out of his teens declare, and he used the name of a national leader and a past Prime Minister, "I will not say that Mulayam Singh Yadav is a thief" here he named the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, "*kyon ki*", he continued, "*mein khud chor hum*" because I am myself a thief. There was deafening applause. We waited patiently listening to more speeches of this nature, hoping that the traffic jam would be resolved in course of time.

Well, it eventually was, and after lunch, we started moving again, till evening found us in Auli, where we took the cable car ride over the world's finest snow play-ground, India's answer to Switzerland. Only, there was no snow there, of course, in the month of August. We spent the night in the little township of Joshimath.

The trek to the Valley of Flowers and to Hemkund Sahib starts from a place called Gobind Ghat a few kilometres away from Joshimath. We found the place teeming, even in the early hours of the morning, with pilgrims and tourists, and pony-wallahs canvassing custom. We hired a pony to carry our backpacks and then without further ado set out for the long haul to the night-stop for the day, a small village called Ghangaria, some 13 kilometres away.



Our group in the Valley, just before our return



A woman carried in a Doli

A Walk in Nandan Kanan, the Valley of the Gods

Shanthi Radhakrishnan

The roaring of the Lakshman Ganga in its tumultuous descent from the hills kept us company as we walked along the narrow bridle path. The air was thick

with the stench of horse dung and the sun beat down relentlessly. But that did not deter us – tomorrow was another day and perhaps *Nandan Kanan* (The playground of the gods), as the Valley of Flowers was known in mythology, would be worth it all.

Friendly hill folk

My musings were however disturbed by a loud yell.

“Areh. .. oh. .. Mohan!” — the cheerful greeting came from the direction of one of the smaller, nondescript *dhabas* roadside eateries. Our travel companion Mohan belonged to a local village and a vivacious conversation followed in the Garhwali dialect.

On learning that we had come all the way from Kerala the *dhabawallah* eatery owner was curious to know what had brought us so far from home. “Why, the unspoilt beauty of the hills...”, we replied. Visibly swelling with

pride at our words, he graciously added that he too, had heard that the state of Kerala, like Garhwal, was very beautiful. Thereafter, we were his honoured guests—his humble shop cum house was to be considered our home and everything he had was on the house.

The warm welcome from the simple hill dweller made us forget the weariness and drudgery of the first lap of our trek from the road head from Gobind Ghat to Ghangaria. The die was cast as we crossed the hanging bridge across the Alakananda.

Valley of Flowers

The Valley of Flowers, which was declared a World Heritage Site in July 2005 by UNESCO, was our destination. We had begun our 13 km. uphill trek at mid-day. The first six kilometres along the cobbled bridle path were tough and we stumbled over loose stones, jostling for elbow room with the pack-laden ponies and hundreds of pilgrims headed for or returning from Hemkund Sahib.

But when we crossed the halfway point, the worst was over as the dolies, porters and ponies had probably reached their destination. In the distance, we could see the slopes of the mighty Himalayas. The cool mountain air invigorated our tired limbs and after having glissaded over a small glacier, our enthusiasm soaring anew, we made it before sun down to the base camp at the makeshift village of Ghangaria.



A view of Ghangaria



The way to the valley of Flowers



In the Valley



Crossing the stream



Wild flower seen on the way.



A group photo on the rocks



Yellow Hooded Lousewort *Pedicularis hoffmeisteri*



Silene vulgaris sometimes called lantern flowers because of their shape



Potentilla cuneata, a Cinquefoil



Senecio species



cinquefoil



Pedicularis punctata



Shanthi among the *Impatiens*



Arisaema species



Brahm Kamal Saussurea obvallata



The memorial stone



Brahm Kamal poachers

Ghangaria Village

After freshening up, we wolfed down the hot vegetarian fare and turned in at our Spartan digs for the night. Tomorrow would be the big day. Our guide Pandey-ji had been careful to warn us not to expect the equivalent of a spread of garden blooms at a typical flower show, but that did not stop us from fantasizing and dreaming of the valley, created when the gods showered flowers from the Heavens. According to local folklore, in the Bhyundar Valley there were mysterious spirits that carried off any human,

who dared to wander into their domain.

The next day, having donned our walking shoes, we were off at daybreak with our cameras and a packed brunch. At a short distance from the village of Ghangaria, the path to the valley bifurcates from the one leading to Hemkund Sahib. After obtaining entry permits from the Forest Department check-post, we set off on the three kilometre trek to the entrance to the Valley of Flowers. Beyond this point no ponies are allowed and the only option is to walk.

Bhyundar Valley

Located in the upper reaches of Bhyundar Ganga also known as Lakshman Ganga, a small stream that flows down from the Hemkund lake and waters the Bhyundar valley before merging with the Pushpavathi Ganga at Ghangaria in the Chamoli district of Uttaranchal, the Valley of Flowers is the smallest National Park in the Himalayas covering a little over 87km². The high mountain ranges protect the valley from the cold, dry winds blowing from the Tibetan plateau to the north and the ill-effects of the monsoon from the south, creating a unique ecosystem, which has made the valley the repository for almost all high altitude alpine flora.

The Bhyundar Valley was discovered by the mountaineer Frank Smythe in 1931. Smythe and his companions, after a successful trek

to Mt. Kamet, lost their way in the inclement weather. When the mists cleared he was filled with awe at the sight of the floral mosaic surrounding him. He returned years later to collect botanical specimens of the wildflowers from the valley, which today goes by the name of the book he published in 1938, *The Valley of Flowers*.

This U-shaped 8 km long valley was probably formed over millions of years by the action of advancing and retreating glaciers, which must have pulverized the rocks. Satellite images have shown that around 63 km² of the park is under perpetual snow, 5 km² is covered by forests and meadows and just a little over 19 km² is the area that blazes forth, for a short while each year, into a profusion of blooms that have managed to thrive even under the most inhospitable conditions.



Rajeev and Abha



The stone marking the spot where the Rudraprayag man-eater was shot



Fairy Land

We had been walking now for a while and it became apparent that we were well into the Valley by then. Silence fell over our group of eleven as we approached the hallowed ground. Trekking through the well-marked trail, strewn over with *bhojpatra* (bark of birch trees) on which ancient Hindu scriptures were written, we paused occasionally to take in the stupendous view — forests of oak, blue pine and conifer covered over with epiphytes and lichen, sunlight playing hide-and-seek through the rust, dew drenched verdant grass with an occasional flower peeping through, and the rush and gurgle of the *Pushpavati* (*Ganga*) as she skipped playfully over strewn boulders. The colonies of blue forget-me-not flowers beside the stone path were a promise of what was to come. With increasing excitement, we negotiated the trail passing through forests and meadows, across little streams and an avalanche slope. Suddenly, the floor of the valley opened up with towering cliff walls of over 2000 m on the northern side; the southern portion was less precipitous with grassy meadows and flowers. There was a

pleasant nip in the air and the sun glinted off the large glacial deposits on the higher reaches of the *Rataban Parbat*. Behind was the *Kunt Khal* and to the left was *Nar Parbat*, which separates the valley of Badrinath from this valley, while the hills on the right were covered with dense forests of birch and rhododendron.

The path to this valley meanders through banks of flowers and across icy streams for the *Pushpavati* divides it into two. At one point we had to remove our shoes and socks and hang it round our necks as we formed a human chain to cross the fast flowing river fed by glacial deposits from the peak of *Gauri Parbat* at over 6700m. Captivated by the beauty of the fragile Himalayan Blue poppy *Meconopsis aculeata* growing between boulders, the photographer amongst us could not help but tear himself away and attempt a solo crossing of the rushing river with disastrous consequences. Acknowledging the fact that he was treading on sacred land, he laughed it off saying that he was merely offering his *pranam* (respects) to Mother Nature.

Flowers galore!

This glacial corridor is snowbound for over six months from the month of November. It is only by the end of April, when the snow begins to melt and flow down the buttresses and along the gullies that the moist turf begins to pulsate with the promise of new life. Little rivulets flowing through the meadows awaken the dormant

flora and by mid-July the Valley showcases the maximum profusion of colour. Every few days the patterns and colours on the carpet of green alter until by the end of September the valley is covered in a dull cloak of brown as a prelude to the winter hibernation under a snowy blanket till the magic of the monsoon breaks the spell. Tread softly! Most of the



A view of the Badrinath Temple complex



Vimala on a pony, with Pandey-ji and Mohan standing by

flowers grow so thick that to leave the path is to crush underfoot what maybe one of the endangered species among the hundreds of naturally blooming wild flowers that have been identified here. Asters, dandelions, edelweiss, gentians, iris, senecios, geraniums, lilies, sunflowers, poppies, impatiens, potentillas, anemones, campanula, geum, larkspur and marsh marigold are some of the commonly seen varieties. But not all of them flower at the same time. In June, uncommon varieties of orchid and primulas bloom, while impatiens, geranium, potentillas and campanula paint the valley in shades of pink, red and purple during July and August. Some of the flower species grow in large colonies besides the stream or on the meadows, like Impatiens species, others like the Arum (*Arisaema costatum*) which resembles a cobra head grow in isolated family groups

in shady recesses. On the left bank of the Pushpavati is a flat area known as Nag Tal with flowers that are said to be poisonous and capable of causing harm, according to local lore, if one even so much as sniffed their delicate fragrance. Of the endemic plants that grow in the valley, a large number are believed to have medicinal properties. The Brahm Kamal, the flower of the gods, which grows at altitudes of over 3800m, is also highly endangered. We were fortunate to see a few of these flowers standing six to eight inches tall with cream coloured petals, which contain the brown and red stamens reputed to be a cure for all known and yet unknown ailments. If you are lucky to be here in the right season it is possible to see rarities like the rose coloured slipper orchid *Cypripedium himalaicum*.

The Conclusion of the trek

Visitors usually trek up to the tomb and memorial slab erected in memory of Joan Margaret Legge, a botanist from the Kew Botanical Garden of London, who had lost her foothold and her life in these very same hills during a collecting expedition in 1939. A few flowers were strewn at the base of the tomb by some visitor, who ironically had committed a crime against conservation by plucking flowers from the park in order to show his respect for the dead botanist. We spent some time there, enjoying the silence and the stillness and the heavenly beauty of the valley before starting on our return

journey. Ms. Legge is the only one fortunate enough to remain in the Valley of Flowers as no night stay is permitted there. I reflected that the comment made by Smythe about the Bhyundar Valley is most appropriate in her case for indeed she lies in “a valley of peace and perfect beauty where the human spirit may find repose”.

All too soon it was time to make our way back to the land of mere mortals. Committing the hills to stand watch over this fairyland, we withdrew with reluctance even as the rising mist enveloped the valley in a shroud of mystery.



Potentilla atrosanguinea



Rajeev taking a bath in the Tapt-kund

Afterword

S Vinaya Kumar

We came back to our rooms from the Valley of Flowers by evening and rested, and ate and slept. Everyone was in a sombre mood, chastened by the otherworldly beauty they had experienced. Uncle-ji said simply, “This has been the most remarkable experience of my life.” And Pandey-ji burst into a Garhwali love song. In my own mind, I remember that along with the wonder of it all, there were also moments of disquietude when I was troubled by the uneasy feeling that such beauty was not meant for human eyes to behold.

Early next morning, the team set out for the most arduous trek yet, the one to Hemkund Sahib, sacred to the Sikh community, situated at an elevation of 4572 metres (15000 ft.).

Pilgrimages and pilgrims have never been my cup of tea, but the experience was interesting, if not particularly enjoyable – interesting mainly because of its novelty. The path went upward all the way, and crowds of Sikh pilgrims, going up or coming down, took us for pilgrims too, and encouraged us with smiles and bits of sugar they carried with them, and with heartfelt “Sabash! Sabash!” (Well done!) by way of appreciation. We were quite obviously not Sikhs, and they seemed to believe that we had nevertheless come for their pilgrimage driven by our intrepid faith in Guru Gobind Singh. I had read the Guru Granth Sahib many years ago in translation, though regrettably I can remember nothing of it today. But after our experience in Hemkund Sahib, I am inclined to view Sikhism and Sikhs in a favourable light.

On the way, there was also a huge glacier which we had to cross. In this area bloomed the Brahm Kamal in significant numbers, its unfortunate name subjecting it to



Shanthi, tired from the climb

indiscriminate poaching and plunder. We could see many people returning with bunches of this flower in their grasp, probably in the hope of making use of the wholly imaginary medicinal properties and spiritual virtues they were supposed to contain.

This kind of rapacious poaching we experienced in the Valley of Flowers too. I was focusing my lens on a flower in the Valley the previous day, when a hand tapped me on my back. I turned to find a small group of half a dozen people. Their leader presented me with a bunch of the choicest flowers they had found in the valley and immediately plucked, and invited me to photograph them “dil bhar ke” [to my heart’s content.]. He added that I need not search for good flowers anymore since they had plucked them all. Fortunately for the Valley, there were very few tourists – we saw only about a dozen other than us – though ALL of them had bunches of flowers in their hands.

The climb to Hemkund Sahib was even more

difficult than it was said to be. We reached the summit to find everything covered in mist. As soon as we had found our way to a wooden bench and sat down, a hand holding an enormous cup of scalding hot tea came out of the swirling mist. “Prasad”, a voice told us, it is consecrated food. Whatever it may have been, it was the best tea I had ever tasted. Inside the Gurudwara, which we entered wearing our plastic rain caps covering the head is compulsory, we were plied with more delicious prasad in the form of nourishing sweet-cakes. Are we also eligible to receive this, asked Shanthi, because we were certainly not Sikhs or even pilgrims. “Kyom nahin,” replied an ancient Sardarji, “Ishwar ek hi hai.” Why not? There is only one God. The Sikhs are indeed a generous and friendly lot, and their generosity of spirit is a far cry from the cupidity and avarice we experienced in many Hindu temples in the course of this journey.

We started our return trek to Gobind Ghat the same day after getting back to our quarters from Hemkund. This time I packed everything on the pony, including my camera and stuff, a decision I spent the rest of the day regretting intensely. There were wild flowers growing in plenty on the way down which were not encountered at higher elevations, and which on my way up three days ago, I was too tired to notice. And now that I noticed them, the camera and lens were stowed safely on pony-back.

At Gobind Ghat, after a quick lunch, we got into the waiting bus. The bandh, which they call “Chakka jam”, a kind of ‘road roko’, is on. Ours is the only bus on the roads, as we started on our way to Badrinath, after an emphatic and heart-felt cry, “Jai Badri Vishal!” The road in this region is quite terrifying. One side is sheer cliff, liable at any moment to come tumbling down in an avalanche of mud and stone. Indeed, as we moved along the winding road, we could



Ganga worship going on in Hardwar



A small, cute waterfall on the way.

Tapt Kund, a pool of near-boiling, volcanic water: a scalding bath it was too, but not unwelcome in the cold weather. Further the hot bath washed away the fatigue and the aches of the arduous trek and the long day. Then we went on to the Badrinath temple. Here once again we encountered Hindu cupidity: if you pay rupees fifty, you can stand here; pay rupees hundred and you get to stand closer to the Sanctum Sanctorum; one wonders what special surprise awaits a person who is ready to pay a thousand rupees! I refused to pay anything, and on the way out, I slipped and fell on the steps – which proves either the existence of a peevish God, or the truth of the law of gravity.

Back at the Rest House, where we were to stay the night, news reached us that a crowd of “ladke” (boys) who were on the rampage as part of the agitation were coming to inspect the township to see if their command not to entertain visitors was being followed or flouted. If we opted to stay, there was danger of being

see tons of mud and water coming down in distant places, as if in slow motion, like a brown waterfall. On the other side was a sheer drop of a few thousand feet waiting to receive us. Our bus driver was a real expert. Still I knew in my heart, lodged at that moment in the pit of my stomach, that only Badri Vishal stood between my poor daughter and orphanhood.

When we reached the Temple township of Badrinath, around 30 kilometres from Gobind Ghat, we found it almost deserted, thanks to the bandh. Ours was the only tourist vehicle to reach there that day. I proceeded to have a refreshing bath in the

caught there for the duration of the bandh. The people in the Rest House advised us to seek refuge in Auli on the way back; nobody was likely to come there since it was a bit out of the way.

We piled into the bus again and started on our way before the “ladke” could come and catch us flat-footed. But soon we ran into a snag. A couple of kilometres before reaching the Auli Rest House which was at the top of a hill, we came upon a landslide blocking further progress. We had wisely packed one small back-pack with all essentials, and taking that and our sleeping bags and



leaving everything else in the bus, we got down and started to walk. It was dark by that time, and since the path led upwards, we trudged up the hill. That night we spent in a dormitory in the Auli Rest House.

This Rest House had a beautiful location, perched as it was on the top of a hillock. But the manager of the place was a disagreeable person who looked upon us “unscheduled arrivals” as a special burden. It seemed that the “ladke” had already phoned him up asking him if any guests were staying there. On being told there was no one, they had threatened him that they intended to come and see for themselves. I asked him politely, “Aren’t there any policemen in the whole of Garhwal?” “Policemen?” he retorted with incredulous distaste, “Policemen? These are our ‘ladke’. And they are fighting for our sake!”

A Bureau Chief of the Times of India, Mr. Kirpekar, was also stranded at Auli. Along with his mother, wife and daughter, he had

driven up from Delhi, but having been caught in the “Chakka jam” was forced to stay there and wait for the roads to open up. I spent the day discussing the Uttarakhand situation with this extremely well-informed journalist. Later, much to my surprise, he wrote a column in the TOI about our conversation in Auli that day.

Our guide meanwhile succeeded in getting through to the HQ, who informed him that the roads were free. So the return journey was uneventful. We stopped for a breather at Nandaprayag Rest House, where the Manager with his gracious hospitality more than made up for the rudeness we had experienced at Auli, where we had been made to feel like unwanted exiles. Another stop was to see and photograph the memorial plaque on the spot in Rudraprayag where, in 1926, Jim Corbett had shot the notorious man-eating leopard of Rudraprayag, which had killed at least 125 people during a reign of terror that lasted 8 years.

We reached Rishikesh by 6 p.m. But the Uttarakhand agitation was gathering momentum, and the situation there did not seem very favourable. Rishikesh was part of Garhwal, but Hardwar was not. So without wasting any time, we got into a local vehicle called a “Phut-Phut”, basically an overgrown Autoriksha, and managed to reach Hardwar without further incident. From Hardwar, our friends were all scheduled to go their separate ways the next day and we were booked on a train to Delhi late next night.

After a good night’s sleep, we spent the day lazing around, walked a bit in the town and had our first proper meal in many days.

We were told there would be a spectacular Aarati at the Temple to River Ganga in the evening, which we wanted to see. All the ancient temples of Hardwar, and indeed most of North India had been destroyed in the Muslim invasions and conquests. There are hardly any temples in those parts which go farther back than the early 18th century. This Ganga temple was no exception. When we reached there, thousands of people, by the looks of them people who had come there from remote villages, at great expense and with great difficulty, were already assembled, and floating lamps were flowing down the river as testimonials to their piety. Everywhere touts in khaki or white uniform, with badges on their dress, made up to resemble police officials, were haranguing the crowds and squeezing them for donations. I was approached too, but he left me alone when I steadfastly refused to accede to his demands. A few minutes later, he returned to me. When I asked him

in an unfriendly manner what he wanted this time, he said, pointing to a colleague of his standing farther off, “Sir, you refused me money when I asked you. Now I entreat you to do the same when that fellow comes to demand money.”

That made us laugh though the general atmosphere of fleecing poor people who were easy prey was quite annoying. So we returned to our lodge without waiting to see the Aarati.



Garhwali boy met on the way



